The Differentiation of Society

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The Differentiation of Society

Niklas Luhmann

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AND CHARLES LARMORE

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Author's Preface

Sociology, since its origins in the nineteenth century, has endeavored to make modern society intelligible as a historical unit. For this purpose, it has elaborated numerous concepts and sometimes even theories. By the time of the French Revolution, if not earlier, interpretations of society were all suspected of being covertly ideological. Social theories seemed by nature controversial. As a consequence, it became desirable to limit whenever possible the subjectivity of evaluations and the arbitrariness of the way analytical tools were deployed. Painstakingly chosen concepts and testable theories were meant to subserve these goals. Frequently, as in the Hegelian tradition, perceived contradictions in society were simply incorporated wholesale into social theories. Often, options were held open, without being meaningfully interrelated—thus, Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft, individualism and collectivism, theories of action and theories of structure, to name but a few. This phase in the development of sociology has now drawn to a close. It has exhausted its resources. Further work in the same vein will merely reiterate previous attempts, with predictable futility. Yet, the initial task of social theory remains.

The theory of action systems developed by Talcott Parsons is still the only concerted effort to move beyond this original phase. By integrating the two concepts "action" and "system," Parsons' approach supersedes all endeavors to choose, from a fundamental opposition, only one of the contrasting concepts as the starting point for social theory—for example, action and not system, structure and not process. The way Parsons worked out his theory, however, remains ultimately unsatisfying: His theory is overly concerned with its own architecture. And it is not flexible enough, despite its receptivity to contemporary theoretical innovations, to incorporate a wide variety of concepts and the empirical information that has been gathered in connection with them. Parsons' attempt was grandiose, but it underestimated the problems of a theoretical synthesis as well as the difficulties of developing a convincing interpretation of modern society.

Thanks to Parsons, we can now see more clearly what the dimensions of these problems are. The theoretical traditions of sociology remain diverse—but that is the least of our troubles. In the vast interdisciplinary marketplace, we now find increasingly various and enticing offers. Compared with what was available to Parsons, we now have a surfeit of possibilities that no one can thoroughly exploit: cybernetics, systems theory, information theory, as well as highly subtle concepts such as self-referentiality, complexity and meaning.

The list of such theoretical tools could be extended. However, when one attempts to integrate them within a professional sociological context, one encounters major difficulties. First of all, they require us to think at an extraordinarily high level of abstraction. And they compel us to use formulations that point in several directions at once without our always being able immediately to communicate why and in what respect. Moreover, if we seriously intend to take up the existing possibilities for a theoretical synthesis, we shall be forced to use language that is much more technical and rarefied than that of ordinary (or historically concrete) interpretations of modern society. A theory set up in a more complex way, of course, enables us to form a more complex picture of society. That means, for example, that it uncovers more positive and more negative characteristics of modern society than conservatively or progressively engaged theories normally do. We can then play with such discoveries, in order to confound right-wing and left-wing theorists who pretend to have all the answers in advance. During the last ten years, in Europe at least, most positions in social theory have become so stereotyped that it has been a simple matter to recognize slogans and to set off protests by remote control.

Unfortunately, this has not proved to be a very beneficial procedure. Modern society, moreover, is now confronted with novel challenges that must be articulated and brought clearly into public consciousness—even (and especially) when we do not yet know what their solutions might be. Modern society was already so far advanced by the beginning of the eighteenth century that it began to respond to its own structures. In the eighteenth century itself this reaction took the form of social theories that registered the peculiarities of each of society's most important functional domains. There were theories that focused respectively on politics, on the economy, on science, and on education. In the nineteenth century, by contrast, attention was shifted to the long-term consequences of the new type of society. Modern society's impact on social and human relations assumed special importance, but the situation had fundamentally altered. It had become evident that the evolution of society might threaten basic preconditions for human survival. Thus, it also became clear that the question of how much time we have available must begin to play a critical role in our thinking about society. To the extent that demands grow, not only resources but time too becomes scarce.

Under these theoretical and social conditions it is difficult to satisfy the requirements of "grand theory," of which Hegel provided the last distinguished example. Possibilities for theory formation have become richer, the social need for interpretations has become more urgent, and time has become scarce. In light of this situation, it seems to me advisable, even necessary, to renounce the artificial and aesthetically pleasing form of a closed theory in order to take advantage of the many suggestions offered by today's theoretical discussions. We must, above all, resist the fatal slide toward specialization—even if this means that the background and the conceptual framework of our own arguments sometimes remain obscure to those not specialized in them.

In recent years, I have worked on two theoretical projects that cross-fertilize one another. On the one hand, I have pursued a general theory of social systems. This theory begins with the Parsonian concept of "double contingency" and makes use of suggestions from general systems theory, the theory of self-referential relations and communications theory. Here, the concepts of "complexity" and "meaning" provide starting points for functional analyses. On the other hand, I have worked extensively on a theory of modern society. We can no longer define society by giving primacy to one of its functional domains. It cannot be depicted as civil society, as capitalist/socialist society, or as a scientific-technocratic system. We must replace such interpretations by a definition of society that refers to social differentiation. Modern society, unlike all earlier societies, is a functionally differentiated system. Its analysis thus requires a detailed study of each of its single functional subsystems. Society can no longer be grasped from a single dominant viewpoint. Instead, its dynamic is clarified through the fact that functional systems for politics, the economy, science, law, education, religion, family, etc. have become relatively autonomous and now mutually furnish environments for one another.

The essays translated in this volume concentrate on the theory of modern society. Suggestions derived from a much more abstract conceptual framework are only introduced indirectly. The highly abstract language employed even here as well as the wealth and difficulty of the concepts used is only a hint of what would really be required. The German language seems to lend itself more readily than English to the dense compression of thoughts and to expressing in a single word more meanings than are subsequently put to use in the context of the entire sentence. This provides possibilities for playfully introducing provisos, afterthoughts, ironies and provocations, and also for conveying references that cannot easily be incorporated into the linear structure of the sentence. Such nuances, of course, are exceedingly difficult to translate. Correspondingly difficult, in fact, was the task of putting these essays into readable English. Stephen Holmes and Charles Larmore have assumed this burden with sensitivity and intelligence. Indeed, it is thanks to them that the English language has finally accommodated the original texts. For their effort and for their cooperative collegiality, I would like to thank them warmly.

Bielefeld, May 1980 NIKLAS LUHMANN

Translators' Introduction

The focal concern of this volume is the historical uniqueness of the West—of "modernity" in all its preconditions and ramifications. In this respect, if not in others, Niklas Luhmann shares the preoccupations of Max Weber. Although the essays that are collected below were composed over a period of fifteen years (from 1964 to 1979), they have a single and clearly defined purpose. Luhmann's ultimate aim, in fact, is to develop a conceptual vocabulary that is refined, variegated, and supple enough to capture what he sees as the unprecedented structural characteristics of modern society. His books and articles are typically prefaced with a claim that many of the most influential ideas inherited from the great tradition of ancient and early modern political philosophy are far too coarse, rigid, and simplistic to help us grasp the hypercomplexity of our present social order. Thus, Luhmann argues that social theory must routinely begin with a "critique of abstraction," with the dismantling of obsolete and procrustean theoretical frameworks. This exercise in razing the past, of course, must be followed by a more difficult (and thus more tentative and experimental) process of building up, by an attempt to replace the jettisoned frameworks with a more flexible and realistic set of categories and questions. What should be stressed at the outset is that the highly abstract, sometimes difficult and abstruse quality of Luhmann's sociology results from his ongoing endeavor to provide a highly general map with which empirical and historical research can approach the study of modern society.

One of the methodological rules to which Luhmann constantly recurs is this: we must always resist the temptation to blame modern society for deficiencies in our outmoded theories. Indeed, his entire approach is predicated on the belief that naïve moralism, afflicting both Marxist and conservative social thought, frequently stems from the anachronistic inadequacy of our descriptive schemata. All too often, he tells us, modern society is diagnosed as "in the throes of crisis" simply because its complex order and novel patterns of change do not pliantly conform to our antiquated concepts of integration and stability. A revamping or updating of the basic categories of social theory, of course, does not dictate a jubilant celebration of "all modernity."[1] But it may help us approach our unsurveyably complex social order in a more cogent and exploratory (and less plaintive) fashion. This, in turn, should allow us to unearth solutions and alternatives for action that have hitherto been concealed by tradition-skewed misperceptions of modernity.

The Idea of Social Differentiation

As the title of this volume suggests, the *idée maîtresse* governing Luhmann's approach to the study of modern society is the concept of social differentiation or pluralization.[2] This too puts him squarely in line with those writers he jokingly refers to as the "founding fathers" of modern sociology, with Spencer, Simmel, Durkheim, and Weber as well as with Parsons. In this mainstream tradition, the easily pictured separation between household and workplace or between personal wealth and business funds has always served as a symbol and paradigm for larger-scale processes of modernization. Luhmann, in point of fact, deploys the concept of social differentiation in his own unique way. Most striking perhaps is his elaboration of the multiple interconnections between distinct varieties of differentiation: for example, between segmentation, stratification, and functional differentiation (the primacy of the latter signaling the emergence of modern society), or between the differentiation of situations, of roles, and of systems. Such distinctions are introduced and discussed in some detail in the text below. What we want to stress here, by contrast, is Luhmann's overarching concern with the undeniably centrifugal tendency inherent in all modern societies.

Today, a gradual process of increasing differentiation has brought into being a type of society that is relatively stable even though it has no single center and no subsector that can claim unchallenged supremacy. According to Luhmann's analysis, one of the basic premises of what he provocatively calls "traditional European social thought"[3] is the notion that orderliness hinges upon centrality. This, he tells us, is why his own concept of an essentially *centerless society* regularly meets with such intransigent opposition. Analogously, Luhmann believes that it is frequently the optics inherited from classical thought, rather than a realistic appraisal of the situation, that induces critics to spot "crises" wherever they look.

(For example, it is sometimes suggested that compartmentalization has now become a formidable menace to social integration. As a backdrop against which the special contours of Luhmann's position can be brought out, consider the following oversimplified piece of sociological folklore. In premodern society, *community*, *power*, and *contract* were fused together in the client-patron relation. This fusion is even said to account for the purportedly stable and tightly integrated character of feudal society and for its much touted "sense of belonging." In the course of modernization, this stylized account concludes, these three patterns of social order were wrenched apart and allotted to discrete social sectors such as the family, politics, and the economy. As a result of this unprecedented centrifugal trend, or so we are told, "modern man" is jittery and modern society is falling apart at the seams.)

Luhmann, as could be expected, is highly skeptical about attempts to criticize bourgeois society on the basis of prebourgeois ideals such as "moral-emotional cohesion" and "communal solidarity." If we redefine the unity of society or social integration as "resistance to disintegration," it even becomes plausible to interpret compartmentalization as a palliative rather than as a threat. In one sense, at least, compartmentalization is a mechanism for enhancing social integration. By localizing conflicts, a highly "parcelized" social order can prevent crises from spreading like brushfire from one social sector to another. In other words, or so Luhmann would have us believe, the "absence of a common life" is hardly a cause for unmitigated grief, since it may well ensure that society as a whole does not flare up like a box of matches.

The term "compartmentalization," of course, is somewhat misleading since it tends to conceal the high degree of interdependence between social sectors that Luhmann believes characteristic of modern society. But the point just made stands. When trying to understand how modern societies are and can be integrated, Luhmann is extremely cautious never to lapse back into obscure and overly concrete notions such as communal solidarity or a shared life. Instead, he regularly and unromantically defines the integration of highly differentiated societies as "the avoidance of a situation in which the operations of one subsystem produce unsolvable problems in another subsystem" (1977, p. 242).

Often adjoined to the platitude that modern society is on the brink of disintegration and anomie are two ancillary claims: (1) that modernization has brought about a regrettable "fall of public man" or "shrinkage of the political sphere," and (2) that modern societies now all face a "legitimation crisis" caused by the erosion of mass loyalty or a decay of general consensus about highest-order moral norms. Luhmann is always gratified to burst these conceptual bubbles which he regards (at worst) as naïve expressions of nostalgia and (at best) as confessions of a misunderstanding of the course of social evolution. Here again, or so he argues, moral opprobrium may result simply from an unthinking application of obsolete descriptive categories. Without attempting to pull together all the diverse strands of Luhmann's complex argument, it is possible to summarize his conclusions quite succinctly:

(1) Differentiation, particularly the specifically modern divorce between state and society, has undermined the descriptive adequacy of the old *res publica* conception of society. Aristotle's *pars pro toto* argument, whereby the polity was identified with society at large, has now lost any plausibility it once had. Man can no longer be defined as an exclusively "political animal," because no one now has his "total status" located inside the political sphere of society. Similarly, the *legitimation* of political authority can no

longer be identified, as it was in the classical tradition, with the *foundation* of society as a whole. And just as politics can no longer be fobbed off as the "essence" of society, it cannot be plausibly interpreted as society's "center" or "core." This is no alarmbell or signal for panic, however, since (in the wake of pluralization) society no longer needs a single hub or center around which to organize itself. Of course, Luhmann never suggests (which would be quite absurd) that government is now less extensive and less powerful than it was in earlier social formations. All he wants to argue is that protests against the "depoliticalization" of various channels of social communication are both pointless and misdirected exercises. Furthermore, he also believes (as we shall see in a moment) that the classical idea that man should have his "total status" inside the political sphere can only have pathological and totalitarian consequences in modern society.[4]

(2) As should be obvious by now (and as will become more so in what follows), Luhmann is deeply indebted to the work of his teacher, Talcott Parsons. Nevertheless, he believes that Parsons always overestimated both the existence and the necessity of shared value commitments in modern society. Luhmann does *not* say, of course, that all need for moral consensus has now vanished. Various forms of consensus remain necessary on a local level and in day to day situations. Still, he chooses to stress the fact that basic consensus about highest-order goals and norms is no longer likely, and that (in any case) society has now become too complex for its unity to be guaranteed by common ethical beliefs. Thus, one of Luhmann's main projects is to explore what could be called "alternatives to normative integration," that is to say, ways in which modern society has maintained (and can continue to maintain) forms of order and orderly change *without* relying on society-wide consensus about communal purposes, not to speak of unanimity about "man's highest good."

One is reminded here of the claim, put forward in classical political economy, that the market mechanism makes it possible for people to have "successful interactions" even with individuals whom they consider crude, stupid, and morally repugnant. As we will see later, Luhmann's marked interest both in abstract "entrance/exit rules" governing membership within formal organizations and in the conditional "if . . . then . . . " structure of the law can be traced back to his underlying concern with mechanisms that provide an alternative to normative integration.

For now, it should suffice to say that Luhmann believes modern society to have already gone an appreciable distance toward institutionalizing such alternatives. He constantly reminds us of the extent to which we manage to get along even without the communal bonds furnished by moral unanimity and a shared life: "today anyone with a normal learning capacity can pursue his own goals as a stranger among strangers, and this possibility has now become an irrepressible feature of everyday life" (1975a, p. 54).

In general, it seems accurate to say that one of Luhmann's pivotal concerns is to redefine "the unity of society" in a highly abstract and loose-jointed way. This allows him to account for what he considers the remarkably high tolerance for both aberrant behavior and conflict within modern societies. (On this point, see selection 4.) Modern society is nothing like a *perfecta communitas* that confers complete self-realization on its lucky members. Rather, it is a highly abstract communicative network that does little more than define extremely vague and lax conditions for social compatibility. Luhmann's desire to provide a new and "weaker" definition of social unity explains the emphasis on "binary schemas" that the reader will encounter throughout this volume. This is an intriguing but difficult facet of Luhmann's thought, and we can provide no more than a glimpse of the direction in which he is trying to move. In contrast to Durkheim, who believed that the unity of society depended on moral consensus about "the good," Luhmann believes social integration possible on the less demanding basis of a general acceptance of a disjunction between good and bad. Thus, members of one and the same society do not have to agree morally about "the good," they merely must accept a much more abstract series of dichotomies or disjunctions, such as good/bad, right/wrong, legal/illegal and just/injust. Members of the same group will all recognize that specified classes of action will routinely be classified as either legal or illegal, and that their public performance will trigger specific and expected responses. Highly complex patterns of behavior and expectations can be coordinated on this basis. Such an approach, as we have suggested, allows Luhmann to define the unity of society in a remarkably loose and abstract way, and thus to avoid making the implausible assumption that common membership in a society requires inward acceptance of "officially" proclaimed moral goods or collective goals.

While considering Luhmann's belief that an acceptance of binary schemes often provides an alternative to normative integration, we should also mention his use of the ownership/nonownership schema of property law. One of the central characteristics of modern societies, Luhmann claims, is the vast increase in our capacity to exploit contingency, that is, our improved or heightened access to "other possible choices" as well as our new freedom to correct ourselves, to start all over again and revise. To inhabit the same property system as you, I do not have to accept the "eternal rightness" of your owning that big, beautiful house. The necessary (though not sufficient) condition for our belonging to a common ownership system is that I recognize the abstract code or set of regulations that (1) assigns this house to you right now and not to me, and (2) that also stipulates the conditions under which it *could* come to belong to me. What unifies us, in other words, is not a conformist belief in the status quo, but rather a common acceptance of "schematized contingency," i.e., of procedural rules for changing the status quo. As we shall see later, one of the central tasks of Luhmann's general approach is to formulate a theory of the unity and stability of modern society that is compatible with what we all experience every day as the changeability and contingency of present social arrangements.

Depersonalization and the Abstractness of Modern Society

Luhmann's first major book, *Funktionen und Folgen formaler Organisationen* or The Functions and Consequences of Formal Organizations (1964a), still ranks as one of his most eloquent and polished performances. Fortunately, the line of thought developed there is sketched out in selection 4, so we need not provide another capsule summary here. What it might be helpful to underline, instead, is the extent to which in his subsequent work Luhmann has lifted various insights from the theory of bureaucratic administration and applied them in modified form to the general theory of modern society.[5]

A paradox with which Luhmann frequently teases his readers is this: "The whole is less than the sum of its parts." This maxim is meant to remind us of the extent to which each of the highly specialized systems of modern society involves an abstraction from and indifference to multiple aspects of the lives of concrete individuals. In the theory of formal organizations, it has long been a commonplace to stress the way an organization is enabled to solve problems, adapt to unprecedented situations, and make widely accessible new possibilities for action and experience by abstracting from the other roles and quirky psychological motivations of participating members. We do not depend on the benevolence of our mailman to ensure that our mail is delivered, but on a set of abstract "membership rules" that link wage remuneration with a codified set of professional obligations. It is the preeminence in modern society of just such anonymous or depersonalized forms of social organization (based on codified "entrance/exit rules") that has finally demolished the present-day relevance of Aristotelian social theory:

> In the traditional theory of political society, society itself was conceived as a "whole" made out of "parts." The fact that the parts were alive played an essential role in this theory. Indeed, it was set down that the living person, as an individual, was an incorporated part of political society. The latter was, in turn, said to be constructed or made up of concrete men—and not of actions, interactions, roles, symbolic meanings, choices and so forth. Participation in such a society simply meant being an encapsulated *part*. (1971a, p. 36)

In a highly differentiated society, by contrast, individuals cannot be located exclusively inside any single social system. This is the mirror image of the claim that institutions now routinely abstract from the total personality of participating members. In modern society, Luhmann goes on to say,

> subsystems and organizations, including the political system, must be conceptualized as excluding men as concrete psycho-organic units. No man is completely contained inside them. It is characteristic of modern society, in fact, that there is only one type of "total system" within which adult individuals are now thoroughly enclosed: the insane asylum. And we may well hesitate to view this case as a model for the political system. (*ibid.*, p. 37)

It goes without saying that Luhmann does not interpret increasing depersonalization as "alienation" or "reification" in the simple-minded neo-Marxist sense. The anonymity of social relations may be frustrating in some respects, he admits, yet it also has numerous humanly valuable consequences. First of all, as we have already mentioned, an organization that is able to abstract from the personalities of its individual members is thereby put in a position to create new possibilities from which all individuals may profit. To this extent, freedom thrives on depersonalization. A second dimension to this issue can be brought out by contrasting *corvée* labor with monetary taxation. As Adam Smith already pointed out, monetary taxation is preferable precisely because it is more impersonal: it involves an abstraction on the part of tax-levying authorities from the precise process by which peasants arrive at their annual payment. Depersonalization can thus signal a breakdown of chains of personal dependency and surveillance. Once again, this associates anonymity with freedom.

As one might expect, Luhmann has no sympathy with the idea that our epoch has produced a drab and standardized "mass man." This cliché, he argues, is bolstered by nothing more substantial than an optical illusion. The view that our society is intrinsically hostile to individuality is surely too simple. Indeed, Luhmann goes so far as to claim that "only modern society cultivates and supports the social relevance of individuals" (selection 10); and he is always careful to mention in this regard that marriage for love only became socially expected in the nineteenth century. The myth of the mass man, in any case, is said to stem from the fact that we now encounter an astonishing number of individuals on a day to day basis, without having time to explore all those lives in detail or in depth. The routinized indifference to personality that modern society foists upon us, in other words, has simply deluded popular sociologists into discovering a faceless crowd devoid of personalities. That this is something of a non sequitur goes without saying (1965, pp. 50–55).

One of the most personally burdensome characteristics of a sharply differentiated society, says Luhmann, is the absence of socially approved models for how to combine a plurality of roles into coherent life stories. The modern emphasis on individuality can thus be seen as a reaction to the increased importance of discrete personalities as unsupervised agents of volition and choice (marrying for love and spending their money where, when, with whom, and for what they want). Individuality flourishes, it turns out, precisely in a society where formal organizations have managed to "institutionalize voluntariness" by spelling out membership rules governing entrance and exit. At any rate, another reason why critics of modern society can announce the "end of individuality" (despite all evidence to the contrary) is that we now all have much higher expectations of personal uniqueness than ever before—and heightened expectations are easier to disappoint.

Luhmann provides another and closely related diagnosis of the "rancor against modernity" that it is appropriate to mention here. One of the psychological difficulties of living in modern society, he admits, is the disorienting abundance of choices that threaten to inundate the individual. The future has always contained more "real possibilities" than could ever be compressed into a single present. But in our contemporary "hot" social environment (producing a surfeit of daily life chances), we all become acutely aware of what Luhmann refers to as "selectivity," that is, the necessity of tradeoffs or the discrepancy between the possible and the copossible. Modernity is structurally ascetic, one might even say, since (in a possibility-glutted world) every "yes" entails a plethora of "noes." Indeed, the more alternatives from which individuals may realistically choose, the more "noes" must accompany every "yes." This is true, even though we are also in a position today to realize more possibilities than ever before. The point to be made here is quite simple: by revealing an overproduction of human life chances as a potential source of antimodernist frustration, Luhmann makes it seem quite nonsensical to christen this aspect of modernization with the name "dehumanization."

Differentiation and the Bourgeois Rights of Man

In 1965, just a year after his book on formal organization appeared, Luhmann published another major treatise, *Grundrechte als Institution: ein Beitrag zur politischen Soziologie* or Basic Rights as an Institution: a Contribution to Political Sociology. This book is meant as a contribution to the theory of political legitimacy and social justice based on the premise that there exists a problem-solving relation between facts and values, between social structures and political principles. Luhmann's main focus is on the way the "bourgeois rights of man," rather than mirroring pregiven natural truths, helped solve a critical problem endemic to the institutional framework of modern European or "bourgeois" society. His main thesis, supported by elaborate historical and sociological analyses, is that legitimacy and justice (the two main pillars of rationality in modern politics) cannot be understood as fidelity to highest-order principles of mysterious origin, but only as the adequacy of political and legal institutions to the problems which arise in their social environment.

Now, according to Luhmann, one of the major obstacles to a coherent and historically oriented theory of constitutional rights is a vaporous but widespread conviction that rights somehow "inhere" in the human personality. But this mysterious "inherence," or so he argues, makes no more sense than does the equally obfuscatory notion of a "presocial individual." Indeed, according to Luhmann, the insight that the modern emphasis on individuality is a consequence of the highly differentiated character of our type of society provides an excellent starting point for a sociological reinterpretation of constitutional rights. Inalienable rights to freedom, dignity, equality, and property do not have as their object an inborn "quality" discoverable in discrete individuals. At least Luhmann thinks that it is needlessly uninformative to discuss them in this way. Much more interesting, he believes, is the claim that such rights are valued precisely for the contribution they make to the maintenance and protection of social differentiation. That is to say, the basic problem which constitutional rights help solve lies in the threat posed by the expansionist tendency of the modern political sphere, in the danger that political authorities will destroy the relative autonomy of multiple channels of social communication. According to Luhmann, in other words, the object of rights is not indestructible human nature, but rather a relatively fragile and pluralistic communicative order (1965, p. 187). Property rights, for example, like the right to choose one's own profession (and even the right to strike!) help prevent complete politicization of the economy. The right to worship as well as freedom of opinion and freedom of conscience help sustain the independence of private belief from state bureaucratic control. Rights of information, free press, peaceable assembly, habeas corpus and due process, travel and emigration likewise defend against the subordination of all spheres of life to what began to be perceived in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe as a potentially hypertrophic *res publica*.

The bourgeois doctrine of basic human equality, Luhmann goes on to argue, should also be reinterpreted in relation to the high degree of social differentiation characterizing modern or bourgeois society. Against the conservative cliché that equality is a matter of "leveling," Luhmann insists that the egalitarian ideal should be associated with the task of maintaining the irreducible plurality of social spheres (*ibid.*, pp. 162 ff.). Consider judicial impartiality, for example. Equality before the law means that we have built into our judicial system a series of filtering mechanisms which work to make such factors as political party, religious belief, and economic status *irrelevant* to a man's position as a legal person. (An analogous screening process helps prevent undue pressure—in the form, say, of gifts or threats—from being exerted on the judge.) There are "leakages" of course. Luhmann's point is only that, almost without noticing it, we define discriminatory injustice by pointing to such failures in the judicial filter and not by appealing to any human "essence" which is the same in all citizens. The principle of "one man one vote" has similar institutional connotations. It means that our voting booths (and the secret ballot is relevant here) are "desensitized" to every facet of man's life *except* his role as a voter (*ibid.*, pp. 156ff.).

What we take to be the universal "right" to education—because it involves state intervention in "private" affairs—seems like a more complex case. But, according to Luhmann, it too can be explained in relation to the defense of the plurality and relative autonomy of communicative realms. Universal government-endowed schooling aims at taking some of the responsibility for primary socialization out of the hands of the family. Indeed, Luhmann argues that it is a "functional imperative" of complex and rapidly changing societies to loosen precodified links between family background and the capacity to take on specific political, economic, and cultural roles (selection 10). By promulgating "the career open to talents," it is always worth recalling, Napoleon was able to appear the true heir and protector of the egalitarian revolution.

Not only civil liberties, says Luhmann, but also social justice can be understood in relation to the defense of pluralism. Indeed, to understand Luhmann's conception of social justice and the practical impulsion behind it, we only need mention that politics is not the only sector of modern society with monopolistic tendencies. The inherently expansionist character of the capitalist economy has made it too a constant menace to the autonomy of other social spheres. Rather than locating the crime of capitalism in the atomistic splintering of diffuse and emotionally reassuring feudal solidarity (cf. Polanyi, 1944), Luhmann sees one crucial problem of capitalism in the threat of a "tyrannical" violation of social pluralism. Unemployment compensation, so Luhmann argues, has the exemplary value of social justice precisely because it contributes to the maintenance of a differentiation between economic and family life (Luhmann 1965., p. 131). It is meant to prohibit every fluctuation in the economy from having an automatically devastating effect on a man's life outside the workplace. Likewise, laws against bribery and corruption aim at restricting the "tyranny of money" to a sharply delimited sphere. Finally, even a national health plan might be justified by appealing to pluralist ideals: the allocation of medical help to the ill should not be strictly dependent on their economic status or ability to pay.

The disclosure of this parallel between civil liberties and social justice, we believe, is one of the most interesting features of Luhmann's analysis. Neither economic justice nor political rights aims at building society on the "foundation" of rational maxims or shaping institutions into a "perfect match" for human nature. Rather, the value and rationality of both lie in their contribution to the solution of a social problem, the problem of maintaining a differentiated and pluralistic communicative order in the face of monopolistic threats posed by politics and the economy. Indeed, Luhmann argues that the value we attribute to civil liberties and social justice remains largely unintelligible without reference to this institutional problem. Moreover, by keeping the problem of pluralism in mind we can steer clear of large absurdities in both social theory and social policy. For instance, Luhmann helps us see precisely why it would be absurd to ward off a threat of economic de-differentiation by repoliticizing all avenues of social interchange.

Luhmann's General Theoretical Scheme

At the beginning of many of the essays contained in this volume Luhmann sketches a general theory of society which he chooses to entitle "systems theory." It is our conviction that the function of this theory of "society as such" should be perceived in the light of those distinctive features which Luhmann ascribes to *modern* society and which we have tried to summarize above. Just as in the work of Durkheim and Weber, the fundamental categories in Luhmann's own general theory of society serve to pick out factors whose dominance or relative absence plays a crucial role in shaping modern society. Some of the key variables in his general scheme are "system," "environment," "reduction of complexity," and "contingency." It may be helpful at this point to back off slightly and explain precisely how a theory couched in such highly general terms serves to illuminate our present social order.

First of all, Luhmann's category of "social system" covers organized patterns of social behavior ranging from whole societies to particular sets of institutions within a society (e.g., "the political system"), to particular institutions themselves, to particular patterns of behavior within an institution (e.g., roles). Because Luhmann is chiefly interested in what social systems do—they reduce complexity—he insists that they must always be viewed in relation to their "environments." Any social system confronts an environment fraught with a multitude of actual and possible events and circumstances. Equally immense is the range of possible ways of dealing with such an environment. If the social system is to survive, it must have a way of putting this complexity into a manageable form: it must determine what aspects of the environment it will consider relevant for its operations, and it must establish specific means for coping with those aspects. Such strategies Luhmann calls reductions of complexity. Up to this point, Luhmann's theory does not differ substantially from the influential ideas of the conservative German social theorist Arnold Gehlen. But whereas Gehlen saw the role of social institutions solely in stemming an otherwise overwhelming flood of possibilities, Luhmann is concerned to stress how "reductions of complexity" also increase the possibilities available to us. Certain things become possible only if other things have become actual, and thus only if other specific possibilities have been denied. (The new possibilities opened up by the universalism of the Roman legal system, for example, depended on Rome's breaking with the communal traditions of Mediterranean city-states.) Moreover, in contrast to Gehlen, Durkheim, and others, Luhmann insists that "social rules" do not simply blot out the superabundance of human possibilities. Equally important is the way abstract rules can increase our orderly or prepatterned access to other possibilities. The law telling us how to make a will, for example, is a case of "schematized contingency": it does not tyrannically suppress alternatives, but rather makes alternatives systematically accessible to individuals and groups for the first time.

As we have said, a crucial characteristic of modern society for Luhmann is the greatly increased number of possibilities that social systems now disclose in this way. For instance, only by minimizing the relevance of the familial, political, and economic status of persons can the legal system implement a conception of formal, legal equality (based on abstract rules) that accords everyone individual rights. In Luhmann's preferred jargon, the general trend toward social differentiation provides the context in which reductions of complexity in modern society actually tend increasingly to create complexity as well.

Every strategy for reducing complexity falls short of inevitability. The availability of alternative or "functionally equivalent" ways of dealing with a complex environment is one thing Luhmann means by contingency—a second fundamental category of his general theoretical scheme. However, it is characteristic of premodern societies to deny, to some extent, the contingency of particular social formations. Indeed, the insistence upon certain social practices as necessary and divinely sanctioned forms one of their fundamental ways of reducing complexity. In this regard, Luhmann introduces a distinction between *normative* and *cognitive* approaches to reality: whereas a cognitive approach alters disappointed expectations in order to adapt to reality, a normative approach insists (counterfactually) upon the validity of a disappointed expectation and morally condemns the unwelcome event or circumstance. Now, in contrast to the normative intensity of earlier societies, modern society for Luhmann displays a more cognitive realization of the contingency and thus revisability of given social practices. How, then, does such a society resist being inundated by complexity? Luhmann's answer, which we have already touched upon, is that social systems now develop procedures for carrying out change. Indeed, the very identity of a modern social system tends to consist in such procedures, rather than in particular elements it holds immune from change. For example, the modern legal system does not draw its identity from a bedrock of unchanging natural law, but from a set of abstract rules for making and overturning legal decisions. Likewise, modern politics has shifted the burden of legitimacy away from incorrigible ascriptions (by dynastic lineage) and toward an "institutionalization of precariousness" whereby a regime is thought legitimate because it might be ousted in the next election. According to Luhmann, the opposition frequently erected, by both left and right, between the status quo and "change" simply reflects an inability to grasp the central importance of contingency, mutability, and revisability in modern society.

As social systems make more explicit the contingency of their ways of reducing their environment's complexity and devise procedures for regulating their dealings with the environment, they become, in Luhmann's terms, *self-reflexive.* A self-reflexive process he defines as one that is applied to itself as well as to other things. Thus, today, legal decisions are made regulating legislation and the implementation of laws. Similarly, we can learn to learn, money can be bought and sold, the exercise of political power can be subjected to political power through elections and lobbying, science can be studied, and the subject matter of art frequently becomes art itself. In order to understand the structure of self-reflexive social systems, Luhmann has borrowed freely from various philosophical accounts of self-consciousness, chiefly those elaborated by German idealism and phenomenology. In two of the essays contained in this volume—"The Self-Thematization of Society" (selection 14) and "World Time and System History" (selection 13)—we may watch him probing the extent to which these theories of self-consciousness (and its link with the experience of time) can be generalized to apply to social systems. Here, too, it is Luhmann's concern with a distinctive feature of modern society which underlies his attempt to determine the role of self-reflexivity in all social formations.

The Habermas-Luhmann Controversy

Probably the most influential book in social theory to appear in Germany during the past ten years is the volume that Luhmann and Habermas published together in 1971, *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie: Was leistet die Systemforschung?* or Theory of Society or Social Technology: What is Achieved by Systems Research? This book consists of a number of essays in which Luhmann and Habermas discuss what shape a theory of society should take and what kinds of problems it must recognize and resolve. They also go on to develop rather detailed criticisms of each other's positions. The impact of this book may be measured by the fact that Suhrkamp Verlag has subsequently brought out four supplementary volumes in which other philosophers and sociologists have carried on the controversy. So broad is the range of issues upon which Luhmann and Habermas diverge or disagree that there is no chance of summarizing the contents of the book in this introduction. One constellation of problems, however, does illuminate effectively the fundamental difference between their conceptions of sociology. It concerns the role that normative considerations should play in the analysis of social reality.

An exemplary expression of their disagreement on this matter can be seen in the way Luhmann responds to Habermas's rehabilitation of the traditional distinction between technical and practical reason. Habermas's position is by now rather familiar to Anglo-American readers. In contrast to a "technical" interest in determining causal relationships among things, he emphasizes a "practical" concern with human beings whereby they are conceived not simply as governed by causal laws, but more importantly as communicative subjects. Treating someone as a subject, according to Habermas, turns on the supposition that he has reasons for his behavior, reasons that he would be willing to justify, and that were he to be shown that these reasons are faulty he would modify his behavior accordingly. Thus, to view anyone (even oneself) as a subject is to suppose that he would be willing to submit his behavior to what Habermas calls an "ideal speech-situation" or "discourse" (*Diskurs*) where its justification would be at issue. Finally, Habermas seems to claim that this ideal context of justification does not become a social reality solely because of interference from relations of domination (*Herrschaft*) that systematically distort human communication.

Arguably, a number of the objections that Luhmann launches against this theory of practical reason fall wide of their mark. For example, while he is right that I can interact with others whose behavior I find unjustified (Luhmann and Habermas 1971, p. 320), it is not clear how I could treat them as subjects without supposing that *they* find their own behavior justified. Be this as it may, many of Luhmann's main criticisms do indeed find their targets. Habermas's theory of practical reason may perhaps do justice to what it is to recognize someone as a subject, but, as Luhmann correctly points out (*ibid.*, p. 326f.), Habermas cannot also utilize it as an account of what subjectivity consists in. Having reasons for one's behavior depends on making interconnected choices among a range of possible actions and possible motives. Thus, subjectivity itself must be located at the more fundamental level of our participating in a universe of already constituted meanings which schematize alternative possibilities into some manageable form whereby choice becomes feasible. For such a theory of subjectivity Luhmann typically appeals, throughout his writings, to the work of Edmund Husserl. Furthermore, while Habermas too stresses the importance that the category of "meaning" possesses in the social sciences, Luhmann puts his finger on precisely where this importance lies. Far from being the source of all meaning, the activity of the subject depends upon a system of meanings given in advance (*ibid.*, pp. 28ff.). Thus, for Luhmann, a theory of subjectivity must take into account the subject's dependence upon a background of strategies for simplifying and schematizing the range of accessible possibilities. Only against such a background does the phenomenon with which Habermas is concerned become possible—namely, the choice of certain actions for particular reasons. Again following Husserl, Luhmann uses the notion of "technical reason" in a broad sense to cover the use of such simplifying schemas, and not merely the effort to determine causal relationships (*ibid.*, pp. 247, 314, 358). Contrary, then, to the impression that Habermas and even this book's title (apparently chosen by Habermas himself) aim to create, Luhmann is not a "technocratic thinker" in the sense that Habermas assigns to "technical reason." Luhmann does not think that sociology should treat human beings solely as objects governed by causal laws. But he does believe that sociology needs to take into account the nature of subjectivity, and that subjectivity depends on "technical" reason in *his* sense. Furthermore, even in his own sense of the term, Luhmann is not a solely "technocratic" thinker, inasmuch as he wants general social theory to focus on the "technical" reduction of complexity itself, instead of merely participating in it (*ibid.*, p. 297).

Now we are in a position to see why Luhmann is so skeptical about Habermas's insistent normative concern with the ideal "discourse" as a means for criticizing existent social institutions. Simplifying and schematizing strategies are at work, not only within subjectivity, but also—as Luhmann brilliantly shows in a section entitled "Discussion as a System"—in the development of every discussion. An exploration of every possible approach to a given issue, the unlimited (simultaneous!) participation of everyone possibly concerned would outstrip the time available, overwhelm our capacities for handling information, and destroy our attention and patience. An ideally complete justification of any social practice (or of anything at all, for that matter) is impossible. Consequently, Luhmann argues that to apply the concept of "domination" to every discussion short of an ideal discourse amounts to letting one's normative concerns override the need for a descriptive analysis of the different kinds of limited communication possible (*ibid.*, pp. 355, 399f.). He suggests to Habermas (*ibid.*, p. 401) that, instead of trying to think *herrschaftsfrei* (without domination), he begin to think *herrschaftbegriffsfrei* (without the concept of domination).

Luhmann often expresses this sort of criticism in the form of a general contrast between "normative" and "cognitive" approaches to reality: while a cognitive approach is willing to modify its expectations in the face of experience, a normative approach consists in an unwillingness to learn and in an adherence to the counterfactual validity of disappointed expectations. Luhmann's waggish definition of norms as "expectations that refuse to learn" (1970a, p. 256) may be rather unfortunate, however, since it hardly does justice to the complex role of norms in moral experience. Contrary to what Luhmann appears to suggest (1978, p. 53), moral experience transcends *his* sense of "normativity" not merely in the domain of supererogatory acts, but more fundamentally, in the kind of moral deliberation that anyone must undertake who reflects on his moral obligations. Moreover, this definition obscures Luhmann's valid objection to Habermas's approach. His important claim is that normative concerns should not blind us to the actual differences among the existing phenomena, and not that such concerns necessarily express no more than a dim lack of imagination and have no place in social theory. Indeed, readers of the essays collected in the present volume will not fail to perceive Luhmann's own commitment to the desirability of certain social practices over others. This commitment, of course, is tempered by his belief that all solutions to social problems entail further unsolved problems of their own.

The Sociology of Law

One of the most important areas of Luhmann's sociological thought has always been the law, and especially the crucial role that law plays in modern society. In addition to *Grundrechte als Institution* and numerous articles in the sociology of law (two of which have been translated below), he has published two books, *Rechtssoziologie* or The Sociology of Law (1972a) and *Rechtssystem und Rechtsdogmatik* or The Legal System and Legal Dogmatics (1974a). Unsurprisingly, the development and character of legal positivism has remained one of the abiding themes of these writings. But Luhmann's work in this area has proven quite fruitful precisely because he has succeeded in locating the growth of positive law within the broader context of modern society. Law becomes increasingly positive, according to Luhmann, to the extent that the legal system—like other sectors of modern society—undergoes the process of functional differentiation. By viewing the positivization of law in this perspective, he is able to connect it with other important characteristics of the modern legal system.

Luhmann locates the social function of law at a quite general level. The body of law existing at any time consists in those collectively binding decisions whose aim is to establish some congruence among the expectations of different individuals in society. More simply, the function of law is to ensure that we may all be able to live with one another despite the inevitability of conflict. But in modern society the fulfillment of this function assumes a particular form. Because individuals now display a greater willingness to modify their own expectations and to adapt to the way others modify their expectations, the legal regulation of social life must guarantee that the law be open to constant revision. In a society whose identity is inseparable from change, in other words, the very validity of law will depend on the extent to which it can be changed. And that means law will have to become positive.

Luhmann defines positive law as law whose validity rests solely upon the legislative and judicial decisions that make it law. It does not, like premodern law, claim to draw its validity from immutable, highest-order, and extralegal norms. The growth of positive law allows us to distinguish between legal and moral concerns, so that we may speak of immoral laws which remain nonetheless law. But, more importantly, Luhmann argues that the positivization of law induces a greater revisability in the body of the law and thus enables the legal system to adapt more readily to a rapidly changing society. To the extent that the validity of law derives from decisions, different decisions alone are required to change the law. In short, the positivity of law is closely associated with the greater tolerance for contingency characteristic of modern society. Consequently, the legal system guides its operations not by an unchanging corpus of natural law but rather by formal procedures for making and altering legal decisions. Indeed, these second-order rules themselves are open to revision, although obviously not all at once.

Inherent revisability forms only one of the distinctive features of positive law. In addition to not being grounded upon an unalterable body of natural law, an equally important characteristic of positive law for Luhmann is the relative independence of its source of validity from other areas of social life. Positive law is valid in virtue of *legal* decisions. Although a political institution like the legislature may make laws, it must do so in accordance with procedures that are themselves stipulated by law in the form (for example) of a "constitution." Law is not, therefore, simply the expression of "the untrammeled will" of the sovereign. Thus, Luhmann connects the emergence of legal positivism not only with the greater sense of contingency in modern society, but also with the trend toward functional differentiation which grants a relative autonomy to different social sectors. Luhmann is aware, of course, that sociological investigation can trace the content of the law beyond the confines of the legal system itself. His thesis, however, is that the source of the law's validity lies within the legal system, in the legal norms regulating legislative and judicial decision-making. Moreover, the concern that the law be open to change corresponds to the form taken by this legal regulation of what constitutes valid law, or by what Luhmann would call the self-reflexivity of the legal system. The legal norms determining the validity of a legal decision also prescribe the legal means for altering that decision. Indeed, the modern legal system derives its legitimacy precisely from the procedures it offers for changing the law—procedures that (in turn) may be changed themselves, though only in an orderly and procedurally correct manner. One important result, therefore, of Luhmann's work in sociology of law is to have shown how the positivization of law depends upon the legal system's becoming both self-reflexive and tolerant of contingency.

Viewing the legal system in the context of the functional differentiation of modern society not only helps Luhmann to develop important insights into the positivity of modern law, but enables him as well to connect this positivity with another salient characteristic of modern law—our conception of legal justice. In modern Western societies judicial decision-making is typically guided by what Luhmann terms "conditional programs." Such programs specify that *if* a certain situation occurs, *then* a particular legal decision is to be made (judicial discretion may of course play a role). Such an approach serves to differentiate the legal system from the rest of society in two distinct ways. First, only specific kinds of information about a situation are considered relevant for the case under consideration. Secondly, the foreseeable consequences of a judicial decision do not constitute a factor in the deliberation leading to the decision. For instance, the judge does not have to take into account how the verdict may affect any of the defendant's other social roles—for example, how it may damage his marriage or inconvenience his business partners. Of relevance is only whether the given situation is of the sort specified in the conditional program. In effect, both this general indifference to the consequences of particular decisions as well as a systematic tendency to disregard the general social status of the individuals involved in the case serve to make those individuals "equal before the law."

Legal justice, which we discussed above, depends upon the increased autonomy of the legal system and, more precisely, on the preeminence of conditional programs. Luhmann contrasts conditional programs with goal programs whereby legal decisions (whether legislative or judicial) are made for the sake of attaining certain desired consequences. Goal programs must obviously be far more dependent upon the environment of the legal system. Now, Luhmann does not deny that to some extent earlier societies utilized "if . . . then . . ." models of judicial decision-making. Moreover, he recognizes that legislation—as opposed to judicial decision-making—does often make laws with the aim of bringing about particular desired consequences. But he does intend to contrast modern Western societies, in which social integration is achieved in large part by a relatively autonomous legal system, with today's more ideologically fervent polities, which aim *to integrate their societies* chiefly through the implementation of goals such as "equal distribution" or "economic growth." In such intensely purposive (or ideological) societies, goal programs govern judicial decision-making as well. Luhmann explores this theme at length in the essay "Positive Law and Ideology" (selection 5).

Earlier, in connection with the debate between Luhmann and Habermas, we mentioned not only Luhmann's (rather misleading) distinction between cognitive and normative approaches to reality but also his tendency to mute and camouflage his own normative commitments. Another example of this tendency is to be found in his treatment of conditional programs. The conditional form of judicial decision-making precludes a normative evaluation of any such decision in terms of its particular consequences. Yet Luhmann recognizes explicitly in his *Rechtssoziologie* (1972, p. 231) that the "if . . . then . . . " rule itself, in accordance with which any such particular decision is made, may be justified in terms of the benefits it produces. Presumably, such considerations would play a prominent role in the legislative decision to make such a law. A similar rule-utilitarianism appears to underlie Luhmann's evident approval of the very use of conditional programs in judicial decision-making. In *Rechtssystem und Rechtsdogmatik*, he argues that their indifference to consequences (in particular decisions) sustains the modern conception of legal justice and, more generally, makes the legal system "adequate" to modern society. Its "adequacy," in turn, consists for Luhmann in its ability to perform the function of integrating individual expectations without collapsing the functional differentiation of modern society. And while no reader of Luhmann's work can fail to notice his ironic detachment and skepticism, neither is it possible to overlook his basic commitment to the overall advantages of functional differentiation.

Coda

Over the last several years, Luhmann has authored and co-authored a series of major books on a stunningly wide range of subjects. These include a study of the social function of religion (1977), a sociology of morals (1978), an analysis of the educational system (1979), and most recently a historical inquiry into the development of a novel bourgeois conception of man in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe (1980a). Most impressive of all, Luhmann's writings consistently open up new and provocative perspectives on the subjects of their concern. Because of this, and because of the truly universal scope of his published work, Niklas Luhmann seems richly to deserve his growing reputation as the most original German sociologist since Max Weber.

NOTE: Articles, 1, 4, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, and 14 were translated by Stephen Holmes. Articles, 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, and 13 were translated by Charles Larmore.

The Differentiation of Society

1

Durkheim on Morality and the Division of Labor

I

When Durkheim's book on the social significance of the division of labor first appeared in 1893, there was still no sociology in the sense of an academic discipline. To be sure, the departmental rubric "sociology" existed, as did a body of sociological literature. For example, Simmel's study of social differentiation had appeared in 1890. But there were no sociologists. The legion of opinionated and critical colleagues was missing. The exchange of ideas as well as the refutation of theories proceeded at a much slower pace than today.[1] As a result, only established classics were initially translated into other languages. The first English translation of *De la division du travail social* appeared in 1933;[2] a German translation is being issued now for the first time. In a rapidly developing field of research, temporal remoteness has considerable importance. It makes it difficult to imagine (and we shall not even try to reconstruct) how one might have read Durkheim in 1893. By now, we read him as a classic.

Originally published in 1977 as the Introduction to a German translation of Durkheim's *De la division du travail social.*

This does not mean, however, that we interpret him historically. A theory is "classical" when it furnishes an interconnected set of claims that is no longer convincing in its original form, but that survives as a challenge, desideratum, or problem. The background context of the original formulations, of course, is historical and can be studied as such.[3] What a classical text has to say to later readers, however, lies on the level of theory. In the analysis of classical texts, we must begin with the present state of the discipline—with the current capacity (enhanced in the interim) to draw fine distinctions and with the greater depth and precision of the present-day arrangement of the subject matter. What a classical text was able to accomplish with relatively simple means stands out against the backdrop of altered expectations. The text retains its contemporary relevance so long as its way of posing problems can still be accepted. However, it remains an authoritative standard in an ambivalent sense: from it we can infer *what* must be achieved, but no longer *how* it is to be achieved.

It was in quite a different fashion, namely as a recipient, that Talcott Parsons approached Durkheim (Parsons 1949; 1960b; 1965; 1968a; 1974a). For Parsons, the sociological classics, including the works of Durkheim, had achieved a solid advance in acquired knowledge. He thought that Durkheim, Weber, and others had laid the foundations for an integrated sociological theory and had thus forged the unity of sociology as a discipline. In other words, Parsons believed it possible to accept the solutions they offered as well as the problems they posed. That, in turn, caused him to assert an underlying consistency (and not merely a continuity) in the history of sociological theory. The classical authors became the "founding fathers" of his own theory.

To the extent that Parsons' theoretical work assumed its own quite unique contours, however, it became difficult for him to sustain a piously "receptive" relation to the classic texts. Indeed, this would have implied that Parsons' general theory of action systems should be considered a "legitimate heir," and that controversies of interpretation might somehow be settled as disputes over the legacy of the great sociologists. It is preferable, as a result, to strive for continuity and not for consistency in our relation to classic texts,[4] to pursue the way problems were originally posed rather than the way they were originally solved. At any rate, both increasing historical remoteness and the undecided or pluralistic theoretical situation of the present encourage this step.

In any case, the "catalyst" for the original emergence of sociology as a separate field lay in a new problem rather than in a specific theory.[5] The problem in question arose to the extent that it became difficult to imagine how social order in general is possible. Parsons gladly refers to the way Hobbes, with the help of assumptions about the state of nature, posed the problem of social order (1949, pp. 89ff; O'Neill, 1976). The Hobbesian formulation, however, was coined with an eye to politics, not to "sociality" as such. A search for the foundations of sociality itself, on the other hand, can be found in moral theory—for example, in those passages where Adam Smith criticizes attempts to base morality on self-love, with the argument that sympathy and altruism do not mean putting *oneself* in the place of another individual, but rather mean empathizing with the other *as another* (Smith 1976, p. 317). In this way, it was possible to skirt round the problems endemic to all *philia* or friendship theories (and to all social theories dependent upon them) which presuppose some kind of natural equality among men.[6] Instead, the very otherness of the other becomes the factor which does not simply make sociality necessary and desirable, but actually makes it possible for the first time.

II

Durkheim cites Adam Smith not as a moral theorist but as the famous author of a treatise concerning the advantages of the division of labor. That is symptomatic both for his understanding of the problem and for the way his theory gets off the ground. Durkheim, at least in *The Division of Labor in Society*, is concerned only with one strand of previous social thought: theories of contract and the division of labor. He repudiates these theories because they are utilitarian and constructed on the basis of individual calculations of advantage—*not* because they are theories of the division of labor. Confronted with traditional theories of the division of labor, the self-styled "sociologist" spies opportunities for polemic against a purely individualistic or economistic analysis of the phenomenon. In this manner, sociology comes into its own. In other words, Durkheim's renunciation of consistency in the history of theory (i.e., his break with earlier economic-utilitarian classics) established the autonomy of sociology as a discipline.

That the break occurred precisely at this point, moreover, signaled a continuity with the tradition. Indeed, Durkheim's whole approach presupposes that, in contemporary societies, the division of labor is indispensable for the organization of social relations. A thoughtful polemic guarantees continuity. Durkheim's writings on the methodology of social science, of course, give the impression that an utterly new sort of fact has been unearthed—a social fact—so that it is now only a question of examining this fact in a rigorously scientific fashion. (I shall return to this point in section VII.) For all that, the new theory is not constructed on a vacant lot. It strains for connections, even if they are only polemical, with the relevant tradition. And, at least for the initial development of Durkheim's theory, it was decisive that the embarkation point chosen (both polemically and with regard to the technique of theory construction) was the problem of the division of labor.

Durkheim accepted, though in somewhat modified form, the thesis that *economic* facts and regularities are especially relevant for the structure and development of society (a thesis first formulated in the second half of the eighteenth century in the context of political economy). In order to elevate "the division of labor" to the conceptual level of a theory of society, Durkheim chose to generalize the concept. Thus, he stretched the concept to cover non-economic domains, even to the point where the conceptual component "labor" lost all specific contours in the idea of a "sexual division of labor" (pp. 56ff.). Durkheim's followers, in fact, dislodged themselves from the narrow conceptual framework of economics and spoke generally of social differentiation, role differentiation, and system differentiation. But for Durkheim, his own phrase "the division of labor" had all the advantages of a conveyor belt. It made it easy to transport illustrations and arguments from the special sphere of economic production and services into the context of general sociological theory. Moreover, Durkheim's text allows us to understand precisely why he refused to stretch his concept of the division of labor any further and decided instead to *contrast* the division of labor with a more general concept of differentiation. The crucial factor here was the problem of pathology, deviant behavior, or disrupted moral solidarity. Durkheim refused (book III, ch. 1) to recognize the criminal profession as an example of the division of labor,[7] and reserved for this case the more general and value-neutral concept of differentiation. What he was unwilling to give up in the old concept of the division of labor was the idea of action that conforms to solidarity, that pursues a recognized social (and not necessarily economic) advantage. At this point, it becomes obvious that Durkheim's concept of the division of labor was preharmonized with his concepts of solidarity and morality. I do not mean to say that the correlation between the division of labor and morality (the central thesis of the book) is a mere tautology. But, from the very outset, the concepts were geared to correlate, and this theoretical design determined their elasticity and their limitations.

III

In Durkheim, "morality" and "solidarity" are twins. One could also say that morality is equated with solidarity. I am referring, of course, to the famous "collective consciousness"[8] located in the heads of individuals, and providing more or less leeway for personal uniqueness. The collective consciousness, for Durkheim, *is* society. This conceptualization makes it possible to consider the social order as a "subject" or as an object "for itself." Problems of self-reference and self-foundation are thus concealed within the concept.[9] They are not explicitly formulated in so many words, and this allows Durkheim to handle as a "fact" (accessible to methodologically rigorous scientific research) the object denoted by the conceptual chain "society-collectivity-solidarity-morality-law."

Solidarity, in its turn, is defined positively as cohesion or union (that is, tautologically). It is defined negatively as resistance to dissolution. Through this negative reformulation, what was at first only a metaphorical or tautological concept is made fruitful. Durkheim distinguishes between two types of solidarity, mechanical and organic; and he tries to show that resistance to the dissolution or decomposition of society, far from diminishing, actually increases during the course of social development. One might almost say that evolution enhances the concept. The proof here refers to the well-known phenomenon that in primitive societies (because of their segmentary structure) dismemberment and the foundation of new groups (succession) is relatively easy, while, by contrast, shoemakers cannot live without tailors. Even if solidarity—and notice how this concept is always presupposed!—is important in primitive societies, and takes the form of a collective consciousness in the heads of individuals (leaving little room for personal uniqueness), its genuine development only begins with the division of labor and the organic solidarity created by it.

At this point, *the degree of inequality still compatible with social integration* (and not merely the intensity of fellow feeling) became the criterion for solidarity (book I, ch. 5, 1). Solidarity, although it is only actualized in the experience and behavior of individuals, has a dimension independent of individuals and therefore a possibility for intensification that no longer needs to correspond to anything psychological. On this basis, we can offer the following formulation: an increasing division of labor is associated with increasing solidarity, while the form of solidarity itself must be converted from equality to inequality among the solidary units.

For morality this means an emancipation of individuality and a novel emphasis on the otherness of the other. Precisely in line with Adam Smith's theoretical proposal, morality was asked to concern itself with the identity of the nonidentical (and not solely with the self-realization of the subject). Individuality and freedom of choice, in other words, are derivative phenomena. One might say they came to the rescue when the collective consciousness lost its foundation in the equality that made mechanical solidarity possible. An individual must now compensate for his "otherness" by carefully formulating his own goals. And he must establish a relation to others intentionally (no longer automatically or thoughtlessly). The morality that emerges after such restructuring can only be based on personal freedom. But freedom of choice is not an essential feature of all morality. According to Durkheim, at any rate, only the second morality is a morality of individual freedom.[10]

As Durkheim unfolds this two-act evolutionary scenario, an important problem fades from view. With regard to the concept of solidarity, this suppressed problem can be called the intrinsic character or value of unsociability. With regard to the concept of morality, it can be called the specific quality of evil. Viewed formally, it is a question of the precise way that Durkheim envisions and justifies the dyadic good/bad schematization of morality.

Durkheim handles the distinction between egoism and altruism (p. 196f.) entirely in accord with eighteenth-century English and Scottish moral philosophy: as a natural human property or characteristic, independent of all sociality. We can only view this as a defect in his theory, a defect that prepares the way for subsequent theoretical missteps. Indeed, because these two original and "anthropologically universal" qualities provide the life and dynamism of his theory, Durkheim can present the moral schematism of good versus bad in quite simplified form. At one point, Durkheim even mentions (and the symptom of undecideness is not without interest) negative solidarity. But he explicitly repudiates this concept and thus the idea that the negative might have a particular quality of its own (p. 118f).[11] Negative solidarity, he says, is not a specific sort of solidarity. Rather it is merely the lack of any kind of solidarity. The same, if one follows the implications of his theory, must hold true for morality. Immorality becomes the manifestation of an absence or lack. It thus becomes indistinguishable from anomie. *Les fleurs du mal*, the attractive qualities of evil, have no place in Durkheim's theory.

Technically speaking, this means that Durkheim has no need for a generic concept covering *both* solidarity and unsolidarity or *both* morality and immorality. But this is genuinely bizarre, especially if (along with Durkheim) we attune ourselves to "moral facts." According to Durkheim, in any case, we are not confronted with factually moral and factually immoral actions that together might be classified under a generic concept of, e.g., morality or moral relevance. Instead, it has been conceptually decided in advance that, essentially, there is only morality and solidarity, but that under certain regrettable circumstances these can be cut short from their full realization. Durkheim, in fact, is satisfied with a "privative" use of negation. He conceives negation as mere deprivation, and to that extent his theory remains Aristotelian. Despite all understanding for corruption and incompleteness, he expresses an affirmative attitude toward society; and he adopts a fundamentally optimistic tone in relation to the future.

Durkheim bowdlerizes the two-sided definition of morality (as the disjunction of moral and immoral behavior) by means of his privative conception of negation. Morality, as he depicts it, leans one-sidedly toward "the good." As a consequence, the human desire to evaluate (i.e., to praise and to blame) cannot be easily controlled inside his theory. Indeed, Durkheim usually attaches a distinctly positive value to "solidarity" and "morality." Neither a withdrawal to positivistic scientificity in the face of facts nor aloofness from morality as moralists understand it (p. 44) can inhibit such naïve evaluations when the theory is not built in a complex enough way. Just as the notion of collective consciousness both includes and conceals problems of self-reference, the notions of morality and solidarity only solve their problem "conceptually." This means that they do not retranslate it into testable hypotheses. Finally, the theory's central flaw is declared its main task: "In short, our first duty is to make a moral code for ourselves" (p. 409). In the end, the sociologist (who wanted to lift himself above what moralists usually deduce from their principles) becomes a moralist himself.[12]

IV

Why is morality given such a central position? I speculate that it is because Durkheim formulated his basic problem in an unclear fashion.

Analytically, we must clearly distinguish between two separate problems. The first runs: How do independently acting, decision-making individuals constitute a social relation or a social system? In other words, how is social order possible, even though individuals can choose their own actions? The second runs: How is the relation of the individual to an already constituted social order to be understood?

It is self-evident that these two questions cannot be *answered* independently of one another, since a sociological theory must formulate a consistent idea of "sociality" for its treatment of both questions. But this should not prevent us from *distinguishing between the questions themselves.* Only by making such a distinction, in fact, can we keep open the possibility of alternative answers, rather than committing ourselves in advance to the Durkheimian solution, "morality."

Traditional European social philosophy conceived social community (*Gemeinschaft, Gesellschaft, communitas* or *societas*) as the "interpenetration" of persons, that is, as friendship.[13] Durkheim too starts with friendship; moreover, he starts explicitly with Aristotle (p. 54). Thus, he can write that citizens love and desire one another and prefer each other to foreigners (p. 105). On this basis, society can be defined as the solidarity of individuals with one another, while morality becomes a sort of glue with which the community is held together. In other words, solidarity is directly experienced as morality. Society remains a fundamentally inter*personal* relationship and morality is its regulative principle.

According to this line of thought, however, must not deviant behavior lie utterly *outside* society? Must it not, in the strict sense, be extrasocietal or socially irrelevant behavior? And why can there not be constituted among individuals a countermoral or completely norm-free solidarity? Can not sociality be continually re-created through interpersonal contacts—a kind of solidarity that can neither be reduced to a preconstituted morality nor traced back to a collective consciousness already present in the heads of individuals, but also a solidarity (and this appears briefly to Durkheim as an alternative) that is not attributable to individuals as their own private achievement? Furthermore, the question arises if it is not necessary (precisely when we interpret "the social" as an independent world of facts and when we assume that individualization is increasing in an evolutionary or progressive way) to distinguish between the intensification of a morally binding collective consciousness and the intensification of interpersonal relations in the sense of reciprocal empathy and identification. Rousseau already knew this: being raised in Clarens is no preparation for a civil or bourgeois life in a large-scale society based on the division of labor.[14]

Such considerations have compelled Durkheim's successors to separate the problem of how social order is possible from the question concerning the relation between the individual and society. It is no longer possible to give a single answer to both questions. It is necessary only that possible answers be related to one another. This in turn compels a generalization of the theory of "friendly" interaction (which even in antiquity was already a quite formal theory discriminating among various types of friendship). A theory of interpersonally consolidated social relations is inadequate as a foundational concept for sociology in general. For Parsons, the fundamental problem is that of "double contingency,"[15] while the relation of personal and social systems (by contrast) is a question about the construction of the general action system and of the "interchanges" necessary within it. Although the relation between these two parts of Parsons' theory has remained unclear (Luhmann 1976), a theory to be taken seriously can no longer regress behind this distinction.

This means, however, that an answer to the question "how is social order possible?" can no longer be given with reference to the bare fact of morality or the collective consciousness. Without the reality or relevance of moral questions being denied, such Durkheimian concepts are replaced by concepts such as symbolic generalization, selective or local consensus, the reduction of social complexity, and communication codes. Significantly enough, each of these concepts stresses the fact that the number of available changes or options can be *increased* through structural constraints.

This brings us back to Durkheim.

V

One of the most impressive aspects of Durkheim's theory is the possibility it offers for exploding conventional assumptions about scarcity, or "zero sums," and for depicting positive-sum relations. Its dominant interest, probably the fundamental motivation for the theory itself, is the desire to conceive the relation between the individual and society in a way that leaves open the possibility of a simultaneous enhancement of both realities. The individuation of the person does not necessarily occur at the cost of social solidarity or vice versa; rather, both incremental processes encourage one another and both are possible only on the basis of a specific social structure (i.e., the division of labor) that in turn is rendered possible through them. Later on, Parsons will speak of "combinatorial gains" and will inquire into the evolutionary accomplishments that make such gains possible.

Let us pause for a moment to admire the elegant design of this theory. The central assertions do not have an a priori status. They are not surreptitiously built into the theory's foundations. Neither are they projected back into the initial phase of the development of the theory's object. Instead, they move in the domain of variables whose regular covariations under specified conditions can be ascertained empirically. Such an arrangement made an important contribution toward the autonomy of sociology as a discipline. Eisenstadt has described it in a general way as the transition from a closed to an open concept of theory (Eisenstadt and Curelaru 1976, p. 80ff). In each theoretical context, knowledge appears to be corroborated on its own—not, of course, independent of premises and facts, but at least not as their tautological reformulation. Corresponding to this shift is Durkheim's characteristic repudiation of argumentation from premises—for example, his famous critique of the derivation of punishments from the goal of punishment or the validity of contracts from the norm that makes contracts binding. Such "derivations" are replaced by a more profound circle: the social can only be explained through the social.

If one hopes to formulate a theory with explanatory pretensions, it will eventually be necessary to interrupt this unending game where variables condition each other reciprocally and thus achieve greater and greater complexity. This breakthrough is accomplished by the theory of evolution. It uncovers an independent factor or propelling mechanism that is adequately isolated from the rest of social theory (i.e., that is not itself dependent on the central variables of this theory).

Two alternative types of start-mechanism have been discussed, in Durkheim's day as well as in ours. The first conception begins with Darwin and searches for a *mechanism of variation* (Campbell 1969). Durkheim, however, was prevented from pursuing this idea, because the typical sociological reception of Darwin had linked the mechanism of variation to the individual, and any reduction of social evolution to the characteristics of individuals would have contradicted the fundamental assumption of his theory that society is a reality *sui generis*. Social evolution, he tells us, cannot be conceived as a side-effect of individual striving after happiness or of individuals' need for change (book II, ch. 1, 3). As a result, only the second variant was seriously considered: explanation through *alteration in size*. This refers especially to demographic shifts, but also to agglomeration, e.g., city-formation (book II, ch. 2; cf. Boserup 1965; Spooner 1972). Durkheim makes a convincing case for some kind of correlation between changes in scale and a transition to the division of labor. Whether changes in scale do not already presuppose the division of labor (i.e., are impossible without it) is another question altogether.[16] If this is admitted, then it no longer seems possible to locate a truly independent propelling mechanism that is not codetermined by purported effects. The only remaining alternative, then, is to develop an evolutionary theory that describes evolution as a self-referential process, as an autogenic process creating the conditions for its own possibilities.

Be this as it may, by appealing to population growth and the thickening of communicative exchanges, Durkheim *tried* to avoid a self-explanatory concept—e.g., the division of labor explains the division of labor, or development "is" increasing social differentiation. Significantly, he managed to produce in this way an argument belonging to "complexity theory": increase in size prevents the contact of all with all; this leads to an abandonment of the form of solidarity based on equality; and this, in turn, creates leeway for exploiting the advantages of the division of labor. Durkheim even comes close to formulating a theorem usually attributed to neo-Darwinistic evolutionary theory: the creation of organized complexity is a side-product entirely outside the ordinary scope of evolutionary processes and is therefore not to be explained (cf. Stebbins 1969, pp. 120ff; 1974).

VI

The theory that Durkheim built upon this basis is well known and easy to grasp in reading through *The Division of Labor*. Society has developed from a segmented pattern, based on the equality of all segments, to a social system based on a high degree of professional specialization. As a consequence, it has had to shift the foundations of its solidarity from equality to inequality, and to change its morality as well as its law. Even in modern society, morality and law rest on a collective consciousness. However, both of them now incorporate the necessity for individuals to define their own goals. From this new respect for individual choice among alternatives, there develops a morality of freedom and a form of law that the collective consciousness imposes increasingly less repressively. In fact, law dwindles to the recognition of (1) restitutive sanctions, (2) noncontractual foundations of contract, and (3) authoritative agencies for making and enforcing collectively binding decisions.

It is impossible to discuss here either the far-reaching (and in many respects controversial) implications of *The Division of Labor in Society* for the sociology of law or its detailed arguments. That would require writing the book over again. However, an auxiliary premise that is not elaborated in an explicit or critical way deserves special treatment, for it supports Durkheim's hopes about the imminent arrival of organic solidarity, about a new morality, and about a revival of professional and corporate bodies.

The underlying premise runs as follows: personal contacts generate morality. If one accepts this, if one overlooks the "polemogenous"[17] or conflictual aspects of morality, and if one agrees that the division of labor leads to a multiplication of the personal contacts necessary for life, then the expectation of recuperating community through interaction appears, in fact, to be a credible perspective on the future. In this case, the aspects of modern society blocking such a "healthy" development (for instance: anomie, the inequality that increasingly results from the division of labor, and the polarization of capital and labor) must be seen as remediable pathologies. This manner of thinking, at any rate, is implied by a theory that positivizes morality, moralizes positivity, and also interprets negation as mere "deprivation." So where lies the mistake?

Most astonishing perhaps—especially because of a theory proposed by Karl Marx—is Durkheim's neglect of the ability of *money* to neutralize morality in face-to-face interaction. The initial generalization of the idea of the division of labor, and especially the renunciation of an economy-specific (and thus money-related) definition of the concept of labor, avenges itself here. We certainly cannot claim that Durkheim had no understanding of the problems of political economy.[18] Nevertheless, in disregarding the structural effects of money, in glossing over the very starting point of Marxist theory, Durkheim revealed a serious blind spot.

Durkheim's own "critique of political economy" focuses on the faulty inference from individual to social rationality. He disregards the way society was violently disrupted and thrown off balance by the money-oriented economy of "capitalism." Even if we do not accept the exaggerations of Marxist theory, and refuse to begin with a fundamental asymmetry between exploiting and exploited classes, the other extreme remains just as questionable. It *must* be wrong to neglect entirely the importance of money for practically all social labor and to overlook the extent to which interaction that is morally binding has been replaced by interaction through organizations or price mechanisms. And this is what we get from a theory that has as its main topic the relation between the division of labor and morality! Such a blind spot also explains, incidentally, why Durkheim handles the division of labor only on the level of professions and roles, and never pursues it into the minute subdivisions of the production process itself—for these depend on organization and on money.

In a similar way, Durkheim's explanation of the "pathology" of negative solidarity between labor and capital fails, as we could have expected, on the basis of his theory. It is not traced back to interpersonal "contacts" which otherwise guide the theory (here, indeed, the concept of money is missing) but rather to an inadequate concordance between natural talents and the assignment of functions (book III, ch. 2, 1). If, however, one must assume that the development of organic solidarity depends on such harmonious correlations, how can it ever be achieved?

Durkheim must have thought that he had risen above such political and economic formulations by having extended the concept of the division of labor and by having retraced the principles of exchange and contract to their institutional foundations. But even if we accept all this information as relevant, it remains uncertain *how firmly* such institutional foundations morally oblige interacting individuals. But this is *the* question that Durkheim should have answered if he wanted to establish that (and in what interaction domains of society) there exists a real prospect for regenerating solidarity through personal contacts. As it was, he signaled little more than his own psychological unwillingness to let loose of solidarity.

VII

Durkheim starts with the idea that sociology is a positive science concerned with facts. Epistemologically and methodologically it must strive for "scientificity," and this includes verifying its assertions on the basis of empirical evidence. Therefore, the conceptual chain "society-collective consciousness-solidarity-morality-law" can be read as a concatenation of indicators that guarantee for one another a reference to reality. Durkheim's sociology of law, to pick a prime example, is not developed as an end in itself, but rather provides an indirect verification for his assertions about collective consciousness and solidarity on the basis of more easily ascertainable facts. As already mentioned, his turn toward primitive societies, seen methodologically, has a similar significance.

In this way of proceeding, the theory of science is assumed as a kind of independent legislator. But one might equally well ask: what sort of theory of science might emerge from a theory like Durkheim's?

A key to answering this question is offered by the observation that Durkheim locks away complex relational problems in compact concepts (such as collective consciousness) in order to employ them further as unanalyzed abstractions. This theoretical technique makes it necessary to conceptualize facts in highly condensed or aggregated ways. As a result, it tends to compel one to assert the existence of corresponding *faits sociaux*. The thesis of special *faits sociaux* serves to demarcate Durkheim's own research from psychology and biology. It brings sociology into a position parallel to that occupied by those natural sciences which also have to deal with a delimited sector of the world—with special facts. Unfortunately, an important dimension is thereby disregarded, and after a hundred years of sociology it can no longer be passed over in silence.

Seen from the vantage point of its history, the development of modern natural science can be traced back to an at first gradual but then rapidly increasing improvement in analytical or "decompositive" capacity in relation to facts and evidence of the life world (cf. Bachelard 1953). Assumptions about ultimate (at any given moment, indissoluble) elements, available for being interrelated, cut deeper and deeper. Accompanying this process of decomposition is an increase in the general awareness of how complex the world is, of how selectively it is built. The demands put upon any theoretical reconstruction of the world's relational structure grow. A science will only venture to decompose into ever more basic elements what (in a given theoretical situation) functions as a unit—for example, to plunge deeper into the subatomic domain, or to analyze cells as tiny, but highly complex chemical "factories"—if it can rely on the capacity of its theories to recombine the newly isolated elements.

Twentieth-century sociology has, perhaps without sufficient theoretical preparation and therefore in various directions simultaneously, gone down this path of decomposition and recombination: from man to role, from man to action, from man to social system. The results and ensuing problems cannot be presented here even in passing. In any case, twentieth-century social science has not stuck close to the theoretical forms and modes of argumentation typical of the sociological classics, and certainly not to those offered by Durkheim. His concepts and the facts he studied now seem too densely aggregated. This degree of aggregation let Durkheim appeal to easily recognizable experiences of the everyday world. It permitted condensed and yet readily understandable explanations. Even now, it allows amateurs to read his technical treatises without too much preliminary knowledge, since these books are full of explicit and implicit references to colloquial usage and commonsensical truths. In this sense, classical theory *impedes* the developing autonomy of a discipline by harnessing it to colloquial speech and its means of persuasion. Formulating a special problem and rendering variable the conceptual framework that supports central assertions are only first steps in the historical emergence of a science. In Durkheim's own day, these steps made a "classic work" possible. This work, however, already carried within it the seeds of its own dissolution.

2

Ends, Domination, and System

Fundamental Concepts and Premises in the Work of Max Weber

I

Max Weber's theory of bureaucracy is a familiar and accepted part of our knowledge about organizations. Even his claim that bureaucratic administration brings about an incessant and pervasive rationalization of public life has won wide acceptance. It no longer needs a special introduction. A continuous effort has been made to come to terms with this thesis, to manipulate the concepts it involves, to rework it, fill it out, and submit it to empirical tests. Thus, this anniversary of Weber's birth will not be a time for challenging his opinions. Instead, it appears that it will be a year of commemoration.

Discussions about Max Weber will not remain lively if they are sunk in research about minute details or in historical studies about the man and his work. We can do justice to a great theory only if we are cognizant of its conceptual presuppositions. The basic, undefined concepts of a theory always remain in obscurity: the strength of the theory's presentation often depends on precisely this obscurity. Consequently, a change of approach can occur in concrete research without its being noticed for quite some time. We can be deceived by familiar concepts and ideas and remain unaware that the general framework has been displaced and that old concepts have acquired a new meaning. Thus, it may legitimately be asked whether what was obvious to Weber is still obvious to us, whether we still understand his categories as he understood them. A critique of Weber, in order to remain tempered and just, would have to adopt his aims and approaches. But an attempt to learn from him should take as its object his premises themselves.

Weber based sociological theory on the concept of social action—and that remains generally accepted. He characterized social action as action that with respect to its intended meaning is related to the behavior of others. This "relation of meaning" provides the conceptual foundation on which Weber constructed his types of action and, on a higher level of complexity, his types of social relations. Types of action and social relation vary according to how this relation of meaning is construed. They represent different kinds of orientation for human behavior.

Weber's concept of action did not provide him with any clear directives for choosing different viewpoints for constructing his typologies.[1] He constructed them not by way of a theoretically secure classification, but by the free use of the opposition among traditional, emotional, and rational orientation. Because of this, certain assumptions about the rationality of action appeared obvious, leading further research in a specific direction and helping Weber to justify his idea that bureaucracy is an instrument of rational domination.* These assumptions, which occupy a central position in Weber's whole work, form the object of our investigation.

Access to these assumptions is made difficult by the rather unfortunate distinction between means/ends rationality and value-rationality.† Weber calls an action rational in terms of means and ends when its motivation lies in its being a means to desired and calculated ends. Behavior is value-rational when it is appreciated for its own sake, apart from its consequences. In elucidating this distinction, however, Weber emphasizes that even the decision about an end can have a value-rational motivation if the end is believed to be valuable in itself (Weber 1956, p. 13). The distinction thus assumes that not all actions are oriented toward ends and that not all ends are value-rational but that many are also determined affectually or traditionally. But these cases where means/ends-rationality and value-rationality do not overlap, are (as Weber himself notes in passing) really no longer rational behavior. Weber's distinction, in other words, does not ultimately clarify the structure of rational action. This structure has to do with the fact that the agent interprets his action causally. He understands it as bringing about a specific effect and selects either the cause (the action itself) or the effect (the intended end) according to given values. Causal interpretation and a horizon of values are interdependent, and together, not as opposed types, they constitute the structure of rational action (Luhmann 1962). The concept of an end refers to specific effects of an action that are held to be so valuable that other consequences can be ignored or compensated for.

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* Following R. Aron's suggestion we have translated Weber's term *Herrschaft* by "domination," instead of by Parsons' "imperative control"—trans.

† The usual translation of Weber's term *Zweckrationalität* is "instrumental rationality," but we have chosen to use variants of the phrase "means/ends rationality" in order to preserve the link with the concept of "end" (*Zweck*), with which Luhmann is here concerned.

As long as we look at individual actions, this paraphrase of Weber's concept of rational action may appear at first as an obvious clarification and correction. Its importance comes into view once we rise to a higher level of complexity and investigate action systems in which several persons participate.

Since Weber's time one difficulty has become clearer by virtue of the development of economics: rationality on the level of individual actions is not the same as rationality on the level of social systems—the rationality of a social system cannot be ensured simply through the rational action of its participants. It presupposes new combinations of meaning, perhaps even different categories of understanding that belong to the system itself. In Weber himself this problem appeared only very indirectly and in a particular form: in the analysis of social systems he switched from means/ends categories to categories of domination. True, he did not give up the means/ends schema as the fundamental form of rational action, but he was well aware that most social systems, and especially political systems are not based upon specific ends and specific means. Indeed, these systems can change their ends and means. For Weber, systems are rational so long as they find the means to fulfill the ends they have *at any particular time.* The theoretical analysis of social systems thus begins not with a characterization of their appropriate ends, but with a means that is so generalized that it can serve different and changing ends. This means is domination.

The rationality of domination is measured by its appropriateness as a means for arbitrary, changeable ends. It proves to be appropriate when understood as a reliable means of transferring, in the form of commands, one individual's will to others who (for specifiable reasons and within certain limits) have agreed to accept the instructions. A person who exercises domination has the opportunity to make his ends the ends of others. In addition, thanks to this opportunity he can devise new ends that he could never have fulfilled alone. Rationality is augmented to the extent that *in general* he is in position to dictate to others the premises for their decisions. As a consequence, the extent to which a social system can be rationalized depends upon the basis and limits of this total acceptance (or "legitimacy") of domination. The types of legitimate domination (rational, traditional, and charismatic) that Weber worked out on the basis of his types of orientation for action (while characteristically leaving out pure means/ends rationality) determine the rationality that a social order can attain. Rational legitimation is based upon the appropriateness of domination as a means. From a purely formal point of view, it is the belief in a rule-determined right to issue commands, to lay down rules in general, and to apply them concretely. According to Weber, world civilization is rationalized in the form of legal domination by means of a bureaucratic administrative staff.

This theory, with its impressive compactness, cannot be controverted within its own premises. If we attempt to do so we shall remain trapped there. The crucial premises have to do with means/ends schema and the authority to issue commands, as well as with the link between them that lies in the idea of domination as a generalized means. But we should no longer accept these premises without question. It is no longer obvious that the means/ends schema—as a model for the rationality of *action*—describes in the same way the structure of rationality in social *systems.* Furthermore, we must examine whether commands are really the form of communication that typically and fundamentally underlies the process of rationalization. Finally it is an open question what we gain by connecting the model of ends and the model of commands, by characterizing domination as a means. What is the cognitive status of characterizing it as a means when we must avoid specifying any particular end?

Means/ends orientation, the issuing of commands and the legitimation of domination are conceived by Weber, as in general by the classical theory of organizations, as purely *internal processes* in organized systems. The problematic of the relation between a system and its environment is ignored. Thus overlooked are the sorts of information that a system's relation to its environment brings to bear upon its internal organization and upon rational behavior within it. Underlying Weber's theory is the premise that there can exist only one optimal form of rationality within a system and that once this internal rationality is attained a harmonious relation to the environment sets in. These premises, which permitted theories to neglect a system's environment, seem more and more to have been given up in recent research on organizations. We shall now try to contrast Weber's classical model of bureaucracy with this recent development which has advanced to far more complex ideas.

II

Research on organizations, whose extensive development began only after Weber's death, has not ignored the fundamental questions mentioned above. However difficult it is to characterize the present state of research in a few general phrases, one thing is certain: means/ends and command/obedience have lost their status as the fundamental concepts of this domain. By itself that does not mean that the actual importance of the orientation towards ends or commands has been denied or disparaged (although there are strong tendencies in this direction), but rather that a theoretical rehauling of the conceptual framework has occurred. As a consequence the orientation towards ends and the issuing of commands are no longer taken as the fundamental concepts which define this area of research in such a way that no fact can receive attention that cannot be traced back to ends or commands. Rather they are treated as variables whose actual occurrence, function, and relation to other variables is the object of empirical research.

This development has not taken place through a critical discussion of Max Weber. Instead, battlelines have been drawn up between the classical theory of organizations that deals chiefly with firms and a sociological analysis of industrial firms which has been cultivated mainly in the United States and at first was barely influenced by Weber (Mayntz 1961). It is worth giving a brief report about this controversy, because in the course of it, Weber's initial assumptions were shattered.

The classical theory of organizations based its treatment of correct, economic organization upon a relatively simple conceptual scheme that we can call the "ends model" of organizations.[2] Organizations were seen as systems. A system was understood as an ordering of relationships through which parts are bound into a whole. And the relation of the whole to its parts was interpreted through the means/ends schema. All the parts of a system had to prove themselves to be means to the end, represented by the whole—a characterization that also served as a criterion for what would be relevant for sociological inquiry. Any aspect that did not adapt itself to these conditions was listed as a disturbance, and could not be investigated further.

Within this theoretical framework two different versions have been put forward. According to one version, the end pursued by an organization is one about which there is a full consensus. All the participants are won over by virtue of their particular interests or as a result of debate. The second version sees an organization's end as that which is pursued by a leader who is able to motivate his subordinates to purely instrumental action. Weber was clearly inclined toward the second conception, a choice that demonstrates his healthy, realistic point of view, which guarded him against overestimating the "natural" opportunities for consensus. Within the classical framework itself it cannot be criticized. My reservations are directed more toward his overestimation of the means/ends orientation as a structural law of social systems, toward the initial assumption of classical theory. I am also concerned with the range of alternatives within which Weber made his choice.

With the beginning of empirical, behavioral research on organizations, in which Weber himself (1908) was decisively involved, it soon became clear that actual behavior in large workplaces cannot be understood simply in terms of the pursuit of a common end. Activities in organizations display a pattern in which the end pursued by the organization does indeed play an essential role, but that is not the only decisive factor. Of course, it had always been known that people do not put all their energy into officially proclaimed goals. Instead, they are occasionally lazy, hold back on performance, make mistakes, and break rules. What was new and revolutionary was the discovery made by Elton Mayo and his colleagues in their famous experiments in the Hawthorne factory of the Western Electric Company (Roethlisberger and Dickson 1939). They found that these deviations constitute a social order: they are expected and often are obligatory.

Different sorts of inferences were drawn from this discovery. At first, attempts were made to influence such "informal organizations" in order to make them serve the ends pursued by the formal organization. Today we can say that the so-called "human relations" movement has foundered, and precisely because it wanted to retreat behind this new discovery. Its failure thus corroborates the significance of the original insight: an "informal organization" can neither be deduced from the ends pursued by an organization nor harnessed to their service.

On the contrary, the thesis that the end pursued by an organization defines only a part of the structure of the work situation, has turned out to be extraordinarily fruitful. It has led to a series of important corrections in the classical image of the "end-oriented" organization. They can be summarized as follows:

(a) *Not all ends are "instructive,"* in the sense that from them can be deduced a correct, much less the only correct, means for attaining them. The common welfare as the end of the state, the winning of political power as the end of a political party, and the financial support given to foreign students as the end of academic agencies provide to various extents instructive guidelines for making decisions. But they never stipulate unambiguously the means for attaining them. In fact, what is proclaimed as the end pursued by an organization is often only a vague, ambiguous attempt at justification that allows a great deal of freedom for individual actions. It aims more at warding off attacks than at guiding actions.[3]

The extent to which actions are actually programmed by an organization's end varies from organization to organization.

(b) Because the practical significance of the orientation toward ends varies so much, *the means/ends schema can be largely replaced* by other forms of rationalization. Thus, today schools are seldom rationalized by practical and instructive ends with ascertainable consequences (e.g., to have as many students as possible pass an exam). Instead, they are rationalized by a code of pedagogical behavior that changes with contemporary opinion and can be summarized only in rather vague justificatory ideals (culture, education). Public support of schools does not depend upon their attaining definite ends.[4] Weber's distinction between means/ends rationality and value-rationality tried to account for this difference. But he understood it as a difference between types and not as a relation between different but functionally equivalent modes of rationalization.

(c) The means/ends schema *does not exclude contradictions in the way an action is oriented,* because ends do not determine action univocally. The overall goal contributes to the incomplete rationalization of contradictory subgoals that are pursued by the subsystems as their ends. Internal conflicts and departmental bickering are to be met with everywhere, since the overall end does not offer by itself any sufficient basis for decision-making.[5] By and large, the contemporary literature tends to set down this "displacement of goals" as unavoidable although indicative of bureaucratic inefficiency (Merton 1940; Blau 1956, pp. 93 ff.; Sills 1957, pp. 64 ff.; and Francis and Stone 1956, pp. 37 ff.).

(d) In addition it is possible to *equip an organization with directly contradictory goals.* A structure of contradictory ends means that opposed and incompatible actions are equally permissible, so that decisions between them are as a matter of practice delegated to subordinates. By means of colliding goals in planning, the Soviet administration attains, unconfessedly but sensibly, a strong decentralization and concreteness in decision-making.[6] Similarly we could say that the partially contradictory goals of teaching and research in the university help to ensure the academic freedom of professors.

(e) In order for an organization to endure and to function rationally, *it is not necessary that all members agree with the end pursued* *by the organization.* The most that is needed is a partial consensus concerning a number of means, especially those concerning what is expected of an individual member (Barnard 1938, pp. 137 ff.). Not every member must know and approve of everything.

(f) Thus, in contrast to individual action *the stipulated end in organized systems is typically not the motive for the actions of the members.* The defining of ends and motivation can be separated when motivation can generally (e.g., through monetary payment) be guaranteed. When the end pursued by the organization does have to provide motivation for individual action (which is the case with many leisure associations) there arise additional problems of organization that make the rationalization of the organization more difficult.[7] By being tied down to the motivation of the organization's members, the content of the end becomes immobilized, and the needed continual adaptation of the organization to its environment is obstructed.[8]

(g) *The ends pursued by an organization, even its "ultimate" and "highest" ones, can be modified, reinterpreted or even completely altered,* without the identity of the organization having to disappear and a new one having to be founded (Blau 1955, pp. 193 ff.; Sills 1957, pp. 254 ff.; Johnson 1960, pp. 284 ff.; Mayntz 1963, pp. 66 ff.).

(h) *The attainment of its end does not by itself guarantee that an organized system will survive.* A number of additional outputs is also required. Partly they fulfill "latent" functions, and partly they come about through end-oriented actions by individuals without being meant to further the organization's end. Even that end itself, in order to "present" itself in a plausible and acceptable form, requires actions that do not serve as means for attaining that end but divert energies from directly serving it.[9] At first an attempt was made to solve this problem by counting all expenses involved in maintaining the system as the "costs" accompanying the means. But that makes sense only if a unique causal relation between these expenses and the end pursued by the system can be demonstrated and if these costs can be compared; that is usually impossible. Hence, today it is generally recognized that the maintenance of a system poses a problem of its own, in addition to that of fulfilling the system's end. Yet a theoretically satisfactory formulation of the relation between both problems has not yet been found (Banfield 1959; Rubenstein and Haberstroh 1960, p. 324; Thompson 1961, p. 179; Bleicher 1961, p. 150; Benne and Sheats 1948).

These various criticisms of the concept of an end complement and reinforce one another. If we look at the links between them, we see that they form an internally consistent whole. The category of an end has to do with the intended rationality of action. It is in terms of means/ends concepts that action explicates itself. But if we want to make action the object of a critical sociological investigation, we cannot tie ourselves in advance to the categories of this self-understanding. We would thereby cut ourselves off from an external approach. Rather, sociological analysis must find its own conceptual framework, which will allow it to treat as variable the orientation of action toward means and ends. The criticisms of the concept of an end that we put together above point basically toward this variability. They assert that the orientation toward means and ends can be altered in terms of its actual occurrence, its consistency, and its openness to consensus.

From Marx to Mannheim the conceptual framework for analyzing this variability was a causal theory which was supposed to uncover in their social conditions the causes for whatever ends are pursued and thus to discredit these ends as ideology. Today, by and large, this has been replaced by functional systems theory which makes the function of a means/ends orientation in the maintenance of social systems the cornerstone of its investigations. Before we turn to this idea, however, we must examine the second, complementary classical model of organizations, the command-model of authority. Weber sought to escape from the problems of the ends-model by recourse to this model of commands. It has its own dangers.

III

Weber himself did not rely blindly upon the ends-model. That should occasion no surprise when we recall that in his time the ties between philosophy and science were closer than they are today and that he was not unaware of the centuries-long struggle in philosophy about the validity of the category of ends. Weber recognized the multiplicity and alterability of the ends that are pursued. In place of *substantive criteria for ends* Weber looked to the *total acceptance* of whatever ends a ruler lays down. The concept of ends, once it has been generalized in this way (and thus freed from numerous problems), is combined with the concept of command. A social system then becomes rational if it is guaranteed that, within limits that specify when the system is an appropriate means, it realizes the ends that the ruler decides upon. The means are now linked to the end not through logical deduction, but through commands.

Weber combined a critique of means/ends rationality (which he did not entirely think through) with a strong trust in commands as a form of communication for transferring the will of one person to others. In the previous section we saw that the recent critique of the ends-model in the theory of organizations has to some extent made Weber obsolete. Now we must show that the validity of the model of commands has also been shattered by recent research.

Here, too, the development of new theoretical approaches has required a critical dismantling of the classical theory of organizations. The core of the classical position can best be characterized as an effort to make the means/ends structure parallel to a hierarchical one. At the top of the organization the ends are laid down. The actions that form the required means are then assigned to subordinates. These people in turn delegate secondary jobs to their subordinates, and so on until, on the ground floor of the hierarchy, only the execution of orders is carried out. Since the ends are supposed to precede the means, this priority can be achieved only if superiors are ranked above subordinates. Decisive communications—whether laying down rules or issuing individual directives—thus run vertically, from the top to bottom. They form the underlying structure of the organization. Their model of rationality has the form of allocating competencies for issuing and carrying out commands. A system approaches this ideal if it can create the necessary attitudes toward work and remove the friction arising from other aspects of human social life. This is the goal served by the essential components of Weber's ideal type of bureaucratic authority, in particular: the naming of "officials" from above, the separation of the home and workplace, the impersonality of the office (or, as we would say today, the institutionalized separation of roles), professional training, rule-consciousness, and especially the social prestige that results from these attitudes and mitigates their harshness.

Empirical organizations research has exposed a number of gaps in this circle of ideas.[10] Indeed, the classical theory corrected itself in certain regards: in organizations there "also" exist collegial relationships and a principle of community; to carry out commands, a good attitude and moral sense are required; commands can be conceived only in general terms at the top and so must be made specific, and thus become altered, on the way down. But these concessions cannot save the theory as a whole. Recent research has progressed beyond this stage. Its critical destruction of the classical theory should not be understood as a reaction against the harsh "Prussian" tone of the old theory or as a democratic masquerade. Rather, it is aimed in principle against the idea that organizations are structured through a single form of communication.

Here, too, researchers have come upon the same problem from different directions:

(a) *The command-model views the process of rationalization from the standpoint of a single participant*: the founder, entrepreneur, or ruler. The organization is, in some sense, an extension of the rationality of the leader's own actions. However, the action of each individual participant is in fact only partly rational. An organization cannot be rationalized from the viewpoint of the actions of a single participant, but only as a coalition of all the participants.[11]

(b) The increasing need for specialized knowledge results in *subordinates often being more knowledgeable than their superiors.* Although in one of its forms—the political control of government administration by lower-level functionaries—this problem has been known for a long time and was actually noticed by Weber himself (Weber 1956, pp. 581 ff.), only quite recently has it been discussed in all its breadth.[12] By virtue of his greater, if narrowly specialized, knowledge the subordinate threatens to elude the control of his superior. He can no longer be integrated into the organization by means of commands but rather only through new forms of vertical cooperation.

(c) In addition to their specialized knowledge, subordinates may be independent in other ways, for example, *their personal dealings with the outside world*, which cannot be completely supervised. Although according to the traditional image of the organization (which is still kept up as a fiction in addresses and signatures) all contact with the outside world must be channeled through the top, big organizations, in particular administrative ones, must delegate most of their external contacts. As a result, the superior often lacks detailed factual and outside knowledge and even the "good relations" that a subordinate has to a specific stratum of the environment (the superior looks for them in a "higher" stratum). The exploitation of this knowledge and these relations cannot simply be commanded.[13] Personal relations are "means of production" that must remain private property. Unlike the business-owned resources that Weber had in mind, they cannot be converted into the collective property of the bureaucratic system.

(d) If contact with the outside world cannot all be channeled through the top, then neither can the top be expected to manage all adaptation to the environment and to introduce every innovation. The *ability to learn* that is present in lower positions gains in interest and becomes the object of special organizational deliberation (Kennedy 1962; Carzo 1963). This, too, eludes the command-model.

(e) It is not by chance that contact with the outside world varies with the different levels of the organization's hierarchy. This is the logical expression of the *functional differentiation along the vertical axis*. The classical theory placed all functional differentiation or "division of labor" along the horizontal axis, assuming the vertical axis to be homogeneous. The opposition between top and bottom was expressed as an opposition between issuing commands and carrying them out, between thought and action. It was not seen as a difference in the content of decisions being made. It could thus be assumed that a frictionless chain of command would coordinate the individual levels of the organization. This premise crumbles when we see with Parsons (1958) that "qualitative breaks" in the hierarchy make good sense, since in relation to its environment an organization must perform such a wide variety of functions that they cannot all be rationalized by means of one sort of interrelationship. Thus, the individual levels of the hierarchy can no longer be completely subordinated to each other. Instead, they form relatively independent subsystems that each bring their contributions to the whole.

(f) Another trait of modern organizations is quite similar: the rationalization of *cooperation on a horizontal level.* The prototype is the assembly line, but it has become increasingly significant for collegial decision-making. The old dogma of "official channels" with its limited exceptions no longer governs daily life in organizations. Routine contacts between members of different departments have become a permanent part of organizational planning. The guidance given by a common superior becomes dispensable given this cooperation by the subordinates concerned. The superior comes forward only to resolve difficulties or conflicts, as a stopgap[14] or as someone whose officially high status is needed for ratifying decisions or for presenting them to the outside world.[15]

(g) As a result of this shift in the center of gravity, *the initiative for making contacts between superiors and subordinates moves decisively from top to bottom.* Commands from out of the blue are increasingly replaced by commands that are prompted, requested, and even formulated by their recipients. As a result *the flow of information from bottom to top* becomes more interesting. The effectiveness with which such information is communicated becomes the cornerstone for the performance of the system. It has become clear, upon closer examination, that the traditional methods for strengthening the authority of those in command impede the upward flow of information since they make the subordinates self-protective (Roethlisberger and Dickson 1939, pp. 458, 581 f.; Cohen 1958; Berkowitz and Bennis 1961; Blau and Scott 1962, pp. 121 ff., 242 ff.).

(h) The greater the demands placed on the quality of decisions, *the more important become the processes taking place before decisions are actually made.* Here the ground has been prepared for further research through the realization that there are practically no optimal (i.e., exclusively correct) decisions (Luhmann 1960) and that as a result differences in organizational structure and in the preliminary processing of information must affect the usability of decisions (Cyert and March 1955, 1956, 1963). In comparison with these important organizational questions, the problems of implementing a decision once it has been made, whether by means of commands or not, appear relatively unimportant.

(i) This shift of emphasis from implementing decisions to making decisions touches on a thesis that has been propounded and developed in another area: *the issuance of commands may have little actual influence upon decision-making.* The formal hierarchy does not necessarily reflect the actual power structure of an organization (Mayntz 1958, pp. 59 ff.; Dalton 1959, pp. 18 f.; Pfiffner and Sherwood 1960, pp. 22 f.; Crozier 1960).

(j) *Higher status* is no longer seen as exclusively related to the prerogative of issuing commands. Instead it is conceived as a *multifunctional institution* that, for example, satisfies the interests of personality, eases contact with the outside world, and provides protection when difficult attempts at mediation must be undertaken. It is presented through numerous symbols, among which issuing commands plays a very small role.

(k) In general, empirical observation shows that *explicit commands* are in fact a rather rare form of communication. And when a communication is intended as a command, it does not follow—given the obligatory politeness in all exchanges—that it will be understood as such.[16]

(l) In the original version of the command-model the functions of information and motivation were not distinguished from one another. A command was supposed to be not only a report, but also a stimulus to action. However, modern organizations typically *separate the job of motivating both from the end the organization pursues and from the flow of information necessary for getting the job done.* In general an organization can guarantee motivation through the advantages arising from membership in the system. Thus, the superior can largely distance himself from the function of stimulating work[17] and avoid any reference to it in his own behavior. It is sufficient if he articulates behavioral expectations that have a formal validity. Everyone knows the consequences of open disobedience. Moreover, it seems to be quite difficult, as countless studies concerning correct leadership style show, to fulfill an information-conveying role in a hierarchy while also performing the function of stimulating work (Gardner and Whyte 1945; Roethlisberger 1945).

(m) The ends-model tried to simplify *the problem of consensus*: consensus needed to be produced in the organization (and with the environment) only about a specific end, if the maintenance of the system were to be ensured. That is why such a prominent position could be accorded to commands as a form of communication that presupposes consensus without furthering it. But the weaker, more indefinite, and less instructive is the structure of the system's ends, the more necessary it becomes to reach the broadest possible consensus within and outside the organization about the bases of action and to obtain the assent of as many experts and interests as possible for any particular project. Strategies for building consensus are essential components in the decision-making process of administrations. Their successful application cannot be commanded anymore than consensus itself.

(n) As our final point we still must touch on an important question that arises from the discovery of contradictions in the means/ends schema. It has become doubtful *whether the strict observance of all rules and commands in actual behavior is functionally sensible* (Coser 1962). It is an old demand that commands should not be carried out literally but with a sense of understanding. Even the thesis that infractions have a positive value, insofar as they provide an occasion for symbolic and dramatic punitive actions which confirm the dominant norms, goes back at least to Durkheim (1902, p. 35 f. and 1927, p. 80 f.) and Mead (1918, pp. 591 ff.). Recently, other theories have developed in the same direction. Contradictions in the corpus of rules or toleration of infractions opens up possibilities of tactical behavior that in the whole system can have favorable consequences (Parsons 1951, pp. 299 ff.; Gouldner 1954, pp. 45 ff., 172 ff. and 1954, p. 18 f.; Blau 1955, pp. 28 ff.; Johnson 1960, pp. 301 ff.; Blau and Scott 1962, pp. 141 ff.). And for the sake of an organization's external image many norms and commands are needed, which taken for reality would cause serious confusion (Dubin 1961, pp. 433 ff.). Finally, from the general realization that every system must satisfy a wealth of quite different, contradictory demands, it has become clear that even the nonobservance of specific rules and directives can, so long as authority is spared, perform positive functions in a system (Sjoberg 1960).

These numerous arguments against the command-model of authority do not all derive from a single theory. The connection among them must be made explicit. If we look for their common denominator, there appears to be one fundamental argument. A command, the direct translation of authority into communication, is far too simple a structural category to do justice to the complex conditions for maintaining and rationalizing a social system. Organizations that try to make their goals a frictionless issuing and carrying out of commands must fail to the extent that they near their goal, since they would then have neglected the system's other important needs.

Empirical studies of organizations carried out during the last decades, through their initially quite untheoretical interest in actual behavior and their good sense, have immensely broadened the conceptual horizons of organization theory, and uncovered problems having a degree of complexity that even today is rarely examined clearly. It is certain in any case that the simple categories of means and ends or command and obedience, while adequate for the purposes of everyday life, fail as a means for providing a scientific account of human thought and action. Fundamentally, they are ideas of a simple, linear causal relation: A causes B. They do not work as conceptual tools for grasping highly complex processes such as the conditions of actual behavior in large organizations. The masterly fruition of classical organization theory that Weber effected with these simple tools fascinates us because we know that we can criticize it without knowing how to replace it.

IV

Although criticisms of the ends-model and the command-model can rely upon rather broad foundations in recent research, it is more difficult to find a secure basis for working out further details and for sketching a clear alternative to Weber's general conception of rational bureaucracy. Modern organizational research is scattered among several areas of inquiry and is far removed from any theoretical cohesiveness. Thus, we cannot say that Weber's model of bureaucracy has already been replaced.

Nonetheless, our ability to coordinate a number of separate attacks upon his position suggests that to a large extent a common conceptual basis already exists.[18] The very power and consistency of Weber's formulation of the classical theory of organizations should challenge us to equip ourselves better for a fundamental debate with his position. In this regard, the conceptual approach calling itself "functional systems theory" could prove important.

The insufficiency of simple causal relationships for grasping complex processes has led to an increase of interest in the concept of system. Indeed, it has led to a recasting of that concept. Of course, in general the concept of system is still defined traditionally as a network of relations that integrate parts into a whole. But underneath this idea of a purely internal ordering of parts into a whole a different conception of systems is demanding our attention. According to it, the significance of system building lies not merely in a purely internal ordering of the parts of a whole, but instead in a system's negotiations with its environment. The problems that arise in this regard are what determine whether the internal ordering of the system will succeed and maintain itself in the face of the threats posed by its environment. The guiding image for this conception of systems is that of living organisms.[19] But the conception has become so formalized that its application is no longer limited to biology. For example, the idea of the firm as a social system judges its organization by how well it succeeds in its environment. In the same way, it is possible to analyze the conditions under which public administration can survive and be rationalized in relation to its political context and its environment of interest groups.

This reorientation sidesteps the old ontological problem of how something can be a unity and yet consist of continually changing parts.[20] It replaces the insoluble problem about "substantial" identity with a functional and yet eminently practical kind of question: how is it possible to hold particular system-structures invariant in a changing and uncontrollable environment and thus to give them an identity and help them maintain it? Instead of the purely internal rationality which is concerned with the consistency of an isolated structure, the problem of how to maintain a system in a "difficult" environment comes into the center of theoretical interest. This interest is thus to a large extent a practical interest as well. The structure of a system, e.g. the sort of internal differentiation involved, is conceived as a network of activities which is ordered so as to remain constant in spite of its dependence upon a more or less inconsiderate and troublesome environment. A system is a group of activities that is open and sensitive to its environment and that works over and compensates for environmental pressures.

The theory of such systems has matured to an extent that allows us to dismantle the notion of deterministic systems—the ideal of the ontological tradition, since such systems can assume only one ontological state at a time. They can react to relevant changes in the environment only in a single, predictable way. Consequently, they can be manipulated with precision from the outside. The prototype of such systems is the machine.[21] However, by virtue of their being deterministic, they are inelastic. They presuppose a unique environment which has been tailored to them, and which lends them the necessary support in a precisely foreseeable way. In an indifferent or even hostile environment they cannot survive.

The failure of numerous experiments in small groups and firms, in which a change in physical, social, or organizational conditions was supposed to have increased productivity, has taught us that social systems are not so deterministic that a specific impulse leads to a specific effect.[22] For example, when the style of management is changed from an "autocratic" to a "democratic" one, a group of workers may react either by increasing or by slackening performance. Completely contrary reactions—love and hate, peaceful exchange and conflict—can turn out to be functionally equivalent from the viewpoint of maintaining system-structures that are invariant. Typically, a system has several alternatives at hand with which it can intercept and neutralize changes in the environment. It is precisely upon this elasticity that its stability rests, as well as its ability to find favorable conditions of existence. The system proceeds selectively in its relations to the environment and can thereby hold itself invariant when the environment does not do so. It discards the ontological thesis that nothing can come from nothing.

Lately, the so-called input/output model has been developed as a theoretical paradigm for handling this limited self-regulation of a system open to its environment (Deutsch 1952; Knox 1955, pp. 144 ff.; Easton 1957; Argyris 1957, pp. 248 ff.; Stogdill 1959, p. 13 f., 196 f., 278 f.; Almond 1960; Herbst 1961). It claims that causal processes do not run through a system along a precisely prescribed route. Instead, there is a specific way in which the system seeks out and processes inputs from the environment and sends them back—and does so for the sake of its self-preservation. In this way it can secure the conditions of its existence in a problematic environment. Within certain limits, the system can select which environmental events to absorb from the viewpoint of what it needs for its own productive activity; and it can select its mode of production from the viewpoint of what means it can obtain and what results it can put out. Input and output are for each other viewpoints for making selections. In this way a system possesses a limited and structured freedom within which it can apply various strategies for self-preservation.

By working on the basis of this idea of system, we can dispense with using the means/ends schema and the command-model of authority as our fundamental concepts. While recognizing that actions are sometimes oriented toward ends and that binding orders may be communicated, we can treat them as variables that perform a specific function in the system. Then, in addition, other phenomena can also be considered, especially so-called informal organizations that are not based upon ends or commands.

The function of ends lies in specifying what activities a system must channel into its environment in order to survive (Parsons 1959a, p. 6 f.; Weiner 1960, p. 153; Eisenstadt 1958, pp. 113–17). This is not the only or even the most important strategy for survival. There are social systems that survive chiefly through conflict and therefore pursue quickly changing goals. Other systems (churches, schools, and to a large extent even government administrations) are supported by their environment not because of the specific results they obtain, but because (within the limits set by normal expectations) they are appreciated or considered indispensable by important parts of the environment. In such cases, means/ends rationality is only slightly developed. It is not rational for these systems to apply all their efforts to fulfilling a specific end or a clearly defined group of ends, since the conditions for their maintenance are not adequately represented by an end. Here the exclusive pursuit of an end would necessarily lead to a neglect of other vital duties and concerns.

Finally, there are systems—industrial enterprises for example—that as a rule assume that their existence is secure if they fulfill their ends. They can encapsulate all their problems within one manageable and instructive end that gives information about the appropriate means. They can substitute the formulation of an end for the difficult problem of survival, and only from time to time do they have to check whether the end is still "right" (i.e., whether it performs its function). This idea of systematic function of organizational ends also explains the individual criticisms of the ends-model we listed above: that the orientation toward ends is variable and replaceable and that, when it is made precise through a consistent preferential ordering of specific consequences and directs the system toward its relations to a specific environment that will receive the system's outputs, the system must offer particular compensations to its members.

Like the orientation toward ends, the use of authority and (in a more narrow sense) commands as a form of communication are also assigned a limited role and an unambiguous function by this new theory of systems. Authority belongs to any communication that is accepted as a premise for decision-making without its correctness having to be checked.[23] This can include horizontal or vertical communications, those going from top to bottom and those going from bottom to top, and even communications from the environment to the system. The uncritical acceptance of information from others is the normal form of cooperation in decision-making, the typical procedure in administrations. Without it, everyone would have to form his own judgments about everything. The division of labor in decision-making, which extends the capabilities of information-processing and decision-making systems (bureaucracies) beyond those of a single mind, would not arise.

Such authority is formal to the extent that a rule of the organization guarantees that no disapproval can be expressed about a person's uncritical acceptance of authority. Formal authority unburdens this person of responsibility (although it does not exclude his duty to give an opposing point of view when he spots a mistake). Formal authority does not presuppose that the person in charge has a higher status. Rather, cooperation among colleagues is often formally programmed so that one person can view another's decision as a sign for making his own contribution without having to check that decision.[24] Even those in charge normally make use of this formal authority to maintain the flow of activity and the processing of information and to resolve whatever problems may arise.

Commands have a completely different function. They put into question the normal, impersonal work relations which rest upon the common aim of continuing membership in the system. They present their recipient with the alternative to obey or to leave. Thus, a command always defines the situation personally, since it is addressed to the recipient's membership in the system. By means of commands, official expectations are transferred, in problem situations, to the personal situation of the individual member. He must consider for himself whether the continuance of his membership is worth such a sacrifice. Since a system has only one membership, this question cannot be posed by just anyone. The right to pose this question must be centralized, for otherwise contradictory expectations could then come to be sanctioned. Commands are a privilege of those in charge, yet not as a daily *modus operandi* but rather as a means for posing the ultimate decision in their organization: the continuance of membership.

V

What separates the line of thought in the last section from Weber's work is the fundamental concept of a system open to its environment. The concept of system plays no important role in Weber's terminology. It seems to have been inconsequential for the development of his concepts of action, social action, social relation, and association. He defines association as a particular kind of social relation, as "the behavior of a plurality of actors insofar as, in its meaningful content, the action of each takes account of that of others and is oriented in these terms" (Weber 1956, pp. 26, 13). The problems facing associations are seen to lie in ensuring the reliability of mutually oriented action, and thus in guaranteeing a legitimate order or—as we would say today—in institutionalizing role-expectations. In order to ensure this internal structure of expectations (which is determined by the pursuit of a common end only in the special case of the firm) Weber believed that all large organizations require a leader who will make use of an administrative staff to extend his power. Consequently, legitimate authority as a purely internal process becomes a critical variable for the survival of the association. And the form of legitimation decisively affects the question of whether and in what way the association can be rationally organized. According to this notion, the concept of system becomes dispensable because its traditional formulation (unchallenged in Weber's time) means nothing more than an internal ordering of parts into a whole.

Weber's focus on the internal processes that guarantee the order of a system (as well as legitimate and rationalize it) caused him to overlook an important consequence of his own starting point: even the members of an association belong as persons to the environment. They are not really parts of the system. If we give up the old idea that social groups "consist" of persons and if instead we observe, with Weber himself, that they are composed of actions as their elementary units, it follows automatically that persons are never entirely incorporated into a social system. Instead, only particular actions of theirs are entangled in particular social systems. All the relations of a social system that concern not these specific actions but rather whole persons as action-systems in their own right (and this means especially processes of motivation and legitimation) must be treated as *external* relations of the social system. They are relations to the particular environments made up of its members.

It is symptomatic that both Weber's work and theories prevalent today[25] have not drawn this conclusion. Both the ends-model and the command-model basically presuppose that man as a complete personality lives *within* the social system and that he identifies himself with the bases of action it represents. Distance, indifference, and weak integration are seen from this viewpoint as imperfections that ought to be removed. The more enthusiasm for the common enterprise, the better.[26] But since the motivation for the common endeavor is in fact always imperfect, the classical presuppositions force scientific inquiry to fall back on a normative or task-oriented form of theory, or one relying upon ideal types. Thus, it simply abandons the attempt to grasp the conditions and functions of actual behavior. The traditional, internal approach to systems, the interpretation of systems by way of the means/ends schema and the command-model of authority, the casting of theory into a normative or methodologically shackled form (or one concerned exclusively with means/ends rationality), as well as the treatment of members' personalities as "parts" of the social system are all linked harmoniously together by this one prejudice. A theory of organization capable of undermining this prejudice at every point does not yet exist, although we have been able to pool together a number of criticisms. It is my conviction that such a theory could very well be developed on the basis of the concept of a system open to its environment.

In the previous section we sketched in the simplest form how such a theory would set out. "Open" systems maintain relations of performance to their environments and maintain themselves through the way these relations are linked together organizationally. They are not bound to a simple exchange of services; they do not have to aim their activities to the same partnership systems on whose support they depend. Rather, techniques exist for transferring advantages and opportunities for influence from one sector of the environment to another. The most important of these techniques are power and money. A system can use the influence it has in *one* environment by exchanging it in *another*. It can also stabilize its influence through general respect, trust, or even general sanctions without immediately having to decide what it wants to use its influence for. By generalizing its opportunities it can obtain a certain room for maneuvering. This expands in all directions the temporal horizon that a system has for planning and acting.

Relating special needs and capacities that cannot confront and satisfy one another directly comes to full significance only in a strongly differentiated society. Thus, it has been rightly emphasized that bureaucratic organizations presuppose a differentiated environment (Eisenstadt 1958, p. 110 f.). We can go further and say that a system can hold itself invariant only by negotiating with various environments. The identity of the system presupposes this differentiation. It is unthinkable without it.

The minimal form of environment differentiation is the distinction between members and nonmembers. Typically there is a great difference between members and nonmembers when it comes to forms of influence and the generalization of influence, as well as to processes of limiting and holding constant the structures of a system. In this way, a system can deploy mutually exclusive means of influence—e.g., appeals to loyalty and threats, persuasion and payment—at the same time but with different addressees (Etzioni 1961, p. 6 f.). A more detailed analysis would allow us to distinguish among different kinds of organizations according to how they divide up their environments: public administration, for example, separates its environment into those who receive its decisions, the public in general, the sources of political and financial support, and its own members; an industrial enterprise splits it up into a capital market, a resources market, a sales market, and its own members.[27]

Instead of pursuing these ideas further, we shall conclude by returning to Weber himself, in order to determine to what extent the essential characteristics of his model of bureaucracy can be integrated into the broader framework of a functional theory of systems open to their environment. To do that, we must construe the central themes in Weber's theory (guarantee of order, rationalization, and the legitimation of domination) as system/environment processes and not as purely internal processes.

We shall begin with the last theme. For Weber the legitimation of domination is the critical variable in the relation of a member to the system. Weber sees the contribution of members as essentially a matter of obedient behavior. As a result, questions of motivation are neglected[28] in favor of the question of in what form and to what extent obedience can be mustered. But in this way Weber comes up against the central problem of the generalization of authority relations. By recognizing a general authority to issue binding commands (more generally: to make decisions), members obligate themselves to perform actions not specified in advance. They make it possible for the system to follow continually the changing conditions in *other* environments by altering its own decisions and actions and in a general way to plan this adaptation in advance.

The idea of generalized authority also underlies implicitly the well-known distinction among the three pure types of legitimate domination: traditional, charismatic, and legal (or rational). They differ according to their different susceptibilities to generalization and variability, but they must equally be understood as the factors that delimit the social system from the personality of its members. Legal domination is limited only by posited, formal rules, and thus its limits are variable. It is the most rational form, because the most elastic. For Weber, this is because it makes obedience available as a means for any arbitrary end. For systems theory, this is because it offers the best possibilities of keeping the system secure and adaptable at its other boundary—in its relationship to nonmembers.

In sum, a bureaucratic system is rational in relation to its members when it can motivate respect for decisions that are necessary in relation to nonmembers. It is rational when the relation to nonmembers (whether specific ends are concerned or not) structures the system and shapes the latitude with which the system can vary in regard to its members.

Weber's model of bureaucracy can be put entirely in the service of this perspective. Its essential characteristics (hierarchical organization with those in charge named from the outside, the separation between the workplace and the family and between business and personal property, lifelong professionalized specialization for this work, impersonal orientation) can be formulated in the following single proposition: They free the system from a concern with the motivational structure of its members, and thus with all its own personal and social conditions. Generalization and the separation of roles are the social mechanisms that allow bureaucratic systems to focus one-sidedly on their demarcation from nonmembers.

It is all the more surprising that Weber did not work out in more detail the problems associated with this crucial, external boundary of organizations.[29] He relied on the ruler to set the right ends. And he relied on the untrammeled functioning of the "apparatus" of its members to make the system fully operational with regard to nonmembers. This turned attention away from the problems connected with its external boundary.

We see now that accepting the classical model of means/ends rationality and erasing all difficulties concerned with membership by constructing ideal types led to serious distortion. Owing to his methodological and factual starting point, Weber had no understanding of equilibrium questions.[30] The lack of concern for *one* boundary strips *all* boundaries of their significance, since behavior directed toward the external environment can then no longer appear hampered or difficult. As a result, the actual difficulties of behavior and decision-making in bureaucratic organizations and the problems of making compromises between complex, competing demands within a relatively broad temporal horizon do not get discussed. The many kinds of tactics and tricks, with which the bureaucrat maneuvers in this charged area in order to collect safe and solid bases for action (Weber himself dealt with tendencies toward secrecy) appear in a bad light.

Weber's discoveries still important today concern the interconnection between various social processes of attitude generalization and role separation characteristic of modern bureaucracy. But these insights can be detached from the premises of the classical theory of organization. They can be dislodged from the methodological limitations of ideal-type constructions and incorporated in a more complex functional theory of systems open to their environment. Generalization and role separation are important mechanisms for securing compromises between rival demands stemming from different environments. At the same time they permit system structures to remain invariant even if the system cannot completely control its environment. When this reinterpretation is complete, we can hope to understand the actual behavior in bureaucracies better than Max Weber was in a position to do.

3

Talcott Parsons: The Future of a Theory

Talcott Parsons left his lifework unfinished. The form in which we find it is the result of a continuous theoretical development that lasted for decades. His publications represent waystations in this process. In them Parsons was concerned with the broad perspectives he had achieved, the fascination of solid results, the changing interdisciplinary currents and contacts, and the themes that had met with criticism. But being the precipitate of a historical process, Parsons' theory did not find its best possible form. Readers find the internal consistency of his work a continual problem. This is true especially for critical analyses that, measuring his work against European traditions, look for the role of the subject or the individual. There are various external reasons and avoidable misunderstandings which may be responsible for his writings being shoved aside in America and in Europe. A fair critique of his work would take a discouragingly great effort. Thus, there exists the danger that his work will be mummified and stored for later rediscovery, without proving fruitful to contemporary theoretical developments. Even if his work is one gigantic mistake, no one will even know why.

But we can avoid this outcome. The operative concepts in his work are recognizable enough and are relatively easy to grasp when

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used abstractly. The basic structures in his analysis of the general action system have been sufficiently clarified for us to see what remains obscure or left out. What Parsons himself always recommended for gaining insights into society—that we must pick out structures in order to know where problems lie and changes are taking place—also holds for his own work. A theory's underlying structures allow us to perceive what problems it needs to resolve.

Thus, the future of Parsons' theory does not lie merely in its further internal development. A more important question is what resources and experience are needed for working further on theories of this breadth and scope. Moreover, this is a project that sociology cannot discard without losing contact with its own history and the sensitivity to structural questions that is characteristic of philosophical systems. I am not proposing that we try to anticipate future developments in sociological theory, but rather that we establish a level of theory at which we should be ready for future developments.

Naturally, we are at liberty to elaborate Parsons' theory further and to look for applications. But at the present time it seems at least equally important to let in a bit of fresh air. Important *propositions* have been formulated in his theory, but it has barely been made clear what *decisions* they rest on, where the options lie, and at which points other alternatives can be discussed. In short, the contingency inherent in every theory must be made visible before we can judge its claims and can recognize and explain its consequences.

I

Parsons' theory of the general action system rests upon only a few basic decisions that we can sketch here and consider changing if need be. To do that, we must distinguish between form and content: in this case, between posing a problem and solving it. From a formal viewpoint, Parsons' theory opens with two moves. First it analyzes the *concept of action*. That is, it breaks down this concept into its necessary components. And then it construes the result of this analysis as a *system*. That is, he relates it to problems

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of stability that arise in the areas of time and the difference between system and environment. Why did Parsons proceed in this way?

Before we enter into the details of his theory, we shall make a few remarks about his theoretical approach. By proceeding in the way he did, Parsons avoided every sort of reduction to levels of reality that do not consist in actions, such as material substrates or ideas. He thereby dissolved some corresponding controversies. For Parsons action is an emergent phenomenon that does presuppose features of reality that are not actions, but it can be understood only at a level of order that is constituted through action. (From this viewpoint explanation and understanding coincide, as in Weber.) However, the aim of avoiding *reductionism* does not exclude *analysis* or even hinder it. Although for a particular action-system actions function as elements (unit acts) that cannot be decomposed further, for Parsons the concept of action is still amenable to further analysis. It can be broken down into its necessary constituents. What functions as an element at the level of action-systems can still be broken down at the conceptual level and recombined as a network of relations.

Already at this point various expectable questions arise. Is analysis itself an action, and if not what is its actual social basis? If it is an action, what enables it as a means of decomposition to undercut and go beyond the elementary structures of action-systems? Can an action-system that analyzes actions analyze its own practice of analysis, even if actions within a system function as elements? Must theory at this point rely upon a nonempirical, a priori epistemology? Or can theory justify itself self-referentially by treating itself as one of its objects, as an action-system among others? And above all, how do answers to these questions predetermine the behavior of the theory over time, its ability to learn, and its future prospects?[1]

The direction followed by Parsons' theory-construction leaves such questions aside, perhaps correctly; for can they be answered except on the basis of a developed theory? At any rate, Parsons' theoretical development began with an analysis of the concept of action. This had far-reaching consequences, arising partly because of this initial decision, and partly because of how it was carried

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through. In particular, Parsons introduced action as a *relation, and thus not as an event.* It is a relation between "actor" and "situation" (later, also "actor" and "object"). "Actor" and "object" work as equally necessary features of any action. An action is not only the expression of an individual's disposition.[2] It is equally determined by the situation. Furthermore this relation assumes a temporal form, on the one hand by being a process over time, and on the other by being oriented to goals lying in the future. In this sense, action is "inherently temporal."

By breaking down action into its various components, such a theory requires a linking concept to reconstitute the unity of an action. It is at this point in his theory that, remarkably enough, Parsons placed his *concept of selection.* The needed linkage is ensured by a "selective factor" that excludes both arbitrary and mechanical stimulus-response reactions. This factor Parsons called a "normative orientation" (1949, p. 44f.). Consequently, the traditional set of concepts—necessity, freedom, and normativity—undergoes a characteristic displacement. It is no longer tied to the will of the agent, but instead refers to how the unity of an action is generated. Action is constituted as an emergent phenomenon, which belongs under a theory of social and cultural evolution. Parsons' theory can investigate the agent further, for example by giving a historical analysis of the genesis and institutionalization of individuality. In a strict sense the agent is *not the subject* (*hypokeimenon, subjectum*) of his action (although Parsons did not use this terminology). Instead, we would have to say, at the cost of confusing European minds: the action-system is the subject of the agent.

Parsons' first attempt to analyze the necessary components in the constitution (and emergence) of action yielded this list: (1) actor, (2) end, (3) situation, (4) normative orientation (1949, p. 44f.). This list was significantly modified during Parsons' subsequent theoretical development. Neither the approach nor the method of analysis was modified, nor even the shift in focus from the subject to action, but rather the components themselves.[3] We can describe the final form of analysis in the way that Victor Lidz did: "Its key terms have been the conceptions of actor, alter or social object of action, orientation of the actor, and modality of the object for the

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oriented actor. Action is interpreted as an emergent mode of relation among these fundamental entities."[4]

It is striking how the distinction between actor and object has in effect been mentioned twice, since it also underlies the dichotomy between orientation and modality. However, this second distinction refers to the relation as a whole and characterizes it reflexively, *as a relation.* The agent's orientation is his attitude toward his relation to the object. The object's modality is its relevance in the context of the action-relation. Hence, in addition to the fundamental relation characterizing action, there are further relations that refer to it. We find the same two-tiered network of relations in Parsons' idea of the double contingency of social interaction: "(1) That each actor is *both* acting agent and object *both* to himself and to others; and (2) that, as acting agent, he orients to himself and to others and, as object, has meaning (that should be 'has modality') to himself and to others, in *all* of the primary modes or aspects" (Parsons, 1968a, p. 436).

Of course, setting up a relation between the components of action still does not guarantee the unity of action, since the two reference points of agent and object remain different. Once again we must ask: how is the unity of action guaranteed? Or, where is the selective factor, the component that in the initial formulation was called "normative orientation"? A certain freedom for interpretation exists here. We might surmise that Parsons kept that component, by presupposing it in his efforts to incorporate the linguistic distinction between "code" and "process" in his theory of the general action-system. Another answer is possible with the help of the concept of meaning. All the components of action must be inherently meaningful; otherwise they cannot be recombined. Each answer does not necessarily exclude the other. We can bring them together if we claim that the meaningfulness of the action-context ensures symbolic *generalization* while normative orientation ensures *selective respecification.*[5] *The unity of action* would then lie *in the link between generalization and respecification.* And to this link would correspond, at the level of theoretical analysis, a *link between decomposition and recomposition.* This claim would in turn have far-reaching consequences for the concept of rationality, al-

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though we cannot go further into that here (cf. Luhmann and Schorr 1979).

II

The second decision that Parsons made in constructing his theory concerned his interpretation of action as a system.[6] How does this occur and how can it be justified? The obvious answer is that an action-system arises whenever *several* actions are connected together.[7] The analysis of individual actions must show how such connections are *possible*, perhaps by appealing to the constitutive function of normativity or to the additional claim that an action cannot take shape except with reference to other actions. It would then follow that an individual action by itself is not possible. It can only exist in connection with other actions and thus takes the form of a system.

Of course, this kind of argument does not let us see why an action-system must be an *analytical* system. Basically, Parsons' theoretical ideal requires and makes possible a still closer integration of action-theory and systems-theory. We could express this by saying that for him *every action is already a system by being a relation among its components*. It is a system to the extent that it connects actor and object by selecting their orientation and modality from normative (or meaningful) points of view. How far an individual action should be differentiated into a plurality of actions is then theoretically a secondary problem, having to do with how complex we want our analysis to be. If we opt for this version, we are committed to the concept of an analytical system, for action is then a system by virtue of its analytical internal structure.

Parsons himself clarified the solely analytical character of systems and subsystems by pointing out that they concern only "aspects" of any concrete action. But there is no question that these aspects are thoroughly real, and not simply reflections in the object of our scientific endeavors. They underlie the building of systems, and thus the possibility of sociological knowledge as well. It is in this sense, with reference to the *analytical* elements of reality, that Parsons spoke of "analytical realism."[8] Only as an interdependence

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between particular aspects can the action-system serve to differentiate systems from one another, for example the economy from the rest of society.[9] Beginning with *Economy and Society* (Parsons and Smelser 1956) the AGIL scheme [see below] takes over the task of specifying the possible forms of interdependence. What is concrete is capable neither of forming a system nor of becoming an object of knowledge. Now the ability to form systems and the ability to become an object of knowledge are connected. But they are not the same thing, since the self-analysis of social reality, as it were, is required for the emergence of action. Because these interdependences concern aspects of action, Parsons believed that, strictly speaking, only analytical system-building is truly system-building. It remains an open question how far we can assign concrete actions primarily to one subsystem or another. Parsons' theory lacks the tools to handle this question. To that extent, it strays from the real problems of a functionally differentiated society. For these problems have to do with the consequences of the phenomenon that *concrete* actions are claimed for *specific* functions.

In spite of Parsons' own statements to the contrary, I think that his second position—the claim that action is a system—fits better into his mature theory of the general action-system than his first position. That one, remember, viewed system-building as linking together a number of actions. If action itself is already a system, we can more easily see the point in his later claims that human culture and man's behavior as an organism are "action-systems," even if in social life no actions are attributed to culture and behavior and, from an everyday viewpoint, they are not even able to act. We can say that they act insofar as they are implicated in every action and can assume—more or less distinctly—a functional primacy in determining what actions are to be performed. If we adopted the other proposal, assuming that only a number of actions can together constitute a system, we would have to give additional criteria whereby a set of interconnected actions would constitute a system. We would need these criteria to distinguish action systems and interconnections of actions which cross system boundaries. These additional criteria would probably focus on either the personality of agents or the social character of the interaction. And then it would clearly be difficult to view the individual organism (abstracting

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from personality) or culture (abstracting from social interaction) as action-systems.

At any rate, Parsons' interpretation of action as a system led him to make decisions about theory-construction *that do not follow from his analysis of action.*[10] The problem of how a symbolically generalized unit-act is an emergent phenomenon ceased to be the prime focus of Parsons' theory. In fact, the problem was passed over in silence, to be replaced in his subsequent work by a theoretical concern with systems as such. The problems that Parsons dealt with moved from the area of actions to that of systems. That is why the central problem confronting Parsons' theory is how the relation between the concepts of action and system can be described in the most precise way.

Is this the point where the consistency of Parsons' theoretical program breaks down?[11] Or how can we make sense of this situation?[12]

Parsons' shift to systems-theory took place *via* the problem of stability (Parsons did not mean thereby to exclude change, but to relate it to stability). He broke down this problem into two separate ones: (1) the problem of time, or the tension between the present (of the action) and the future (the means used and the ends pursued by the action), (2) the problem of the difference between system and environment. These two problems concern orientations of action (toward the future and the present, toward the environment and the system) that necessarily go together in pairs. There is no future without the present, no environment without a system (and *vice versa*). Perhaps Parsons would have concluded that he was speaking here only of "analytical" systems. But it is conceivable that concrete action systems develop subsystems that specialize in one of these orientations. If Parsons had only claimed that such subsystems can never split off from the overall system and become autonomous, we could view the relations among such subsystems as internal interdependences.[13]

These two pairs of orientations allowed Parsons to construct a four-category schema (Parsons 1959a). For him this grid defined the form in which an action-system can serve to differentiate various functional systems. These functions Parsons called adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latent pattern maintenance (AGIL).[14]

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By claiming that this schema is deduced from his theory, Parsons could (and had to) postulate that these are the only such functions. That means that *every* action-system must exhibit them (if not optimally, then at least adequately). And that means that the internal differentiation of any social system requires that this schema be exhibited in each of the subsystems *within* that system. These are bold and risky assumptions by which to support a whole theory!

Now our question was to what extent these theoretical moves were determined by his analysis of action. In other words, was Parsons' theory of action discarded, as many people believe, during the course of his work on the AGIL schema? Was the original impulse behind his work still present, or did he change horses in midstream?

In order to answer this question we must consider whether the basic problems in action-theory and systems-theory—in the form that Parsons gave them—are interconnected (even if not identical). In the first case action as an emergent phenomenon (characterized by selective generalizations and respecifications) is at stake, in the second case the stability of social systems (through time and in relation to their environments). In Parsons' writings we do not find any treatment of this more basic question. But the answer may well be the following: since an action has to be constituted by selective processes, it can be a unit only if it takes time into account and delimits itself from what it excludes or considers irrelevant. In other words, action is an emergent phenomenon insofar as it allows problems characteristic of systems to emerge. We might also say that in this case "element" and "system" are concepts that presuppose each other, and that it is precisely this connection between them that in Parsons' work replaces the classical concept of the subject. That is why we can speak of "emergence" here at all.

III

By means of this interpretation we can give a unity to Parsons' overall theoretical development. Perhaps other such interpretations are possible as well. But what have we gained? How unified does Parsons' theory remain when carried out in detail?

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Even if there is a unity to Parsons' thought at the level of the problems he posed and the fundamental concepts used in formulating them, we must still ask to what *use* this unity is put. It is clear that in working out his theory Parsons replaced the unity in the foundations of his theory with the unity of the AGIL-grid. It is this shift, so it seems to me, that poses the critical question about the formal structure, the presentation, the methods of his theory. Is this replacement justified? Or, to put the question more mildly: what consequences does it produce for his theory?

A scientific theory can only focus on a limited number of aspects of its domain and hence must limit its endeavors.[15] A theory putting forth universal claims must therefore adduce and justify its own principles for limiting itself. In other words, it must be able to describe what it excludes and demonstrate that its exclusions are well chosen (Luhmann 1978 pp. 14ff.). As we have seen, one way to do that is to break down a problem into component problems. But what is the significance of introducing principles of limitation into a theory by means of a grid? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this procedure?

Parsons used the AGIL grid to represent the connections among different components. This procedure is justifiable if it can be shown that these connections are necessary ones. We can easily show that this is so for the connection between the temporal dimension and system/environment relations. Parsons correctly insisted that no system can establish its relation to the environment in a point-by-point fashion. A system must carry out processes that are relatively independent of the environment, *and for that it needs time* (Parsons 1970, pp. 30f.). Now this argument does not justify a dichotomy between orientations toward the present and toward the future. Such a dichotomy is problematic for a number of reasons (Thomasius 1696, p. 88f.). But Parsons' argument does show that temporal problems arise because of the ways in which system and environment may be differentiated. The converse is also true: selective processes that want to gain time use their selectivity to distinguish themselves from an environment. And that gives rise to systems.

Hence, the problem is not whether the connections represented by the grid exist or can be shown to be necessary. Rather, we must

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ask *in what way they are made accessible to theory by being put into the form of a grid.*[16] In this light the critical point appears to be the position occupied by the pattern variables, or constructive dichotomies. Not only do they indicate how the squares in the grid are to be interpreted, they also filter out a multitude of considerations and facts. To be sure, it is possible to refine Parsons' analysis of system/environment relations and to develop them at a higher level of abstraction (Barker 1963, Emery and Trist 1965, Simon 1969). The same goes for his analysis of the temporal dimension and the temporal structures of the action-system (Luhmann 1980a).

But there is no point to any further work upon Parsons' foundations if it cannot be made to help in interpreting the spaces in the grid. If the pattern variables are made as precise as possible, we shall lose the ability to use them inside the grid in a unified way. The clear dichotomies begin to dissolve, as Thomasius showed as early as 1696. And the knowledge we gather about the foundations in Parsons' theory exceeds what we can ascribe to the necessary features of how temporality and the difference between system and environment are related. In other words, the grid is a way Parsons' theory has of simplifying itself. It can handle only so much, so that putting more work into the foundations of theory than the grid can process is not worthwhile.

We might repeat here an argument that Parsons used about structural functionalism.[17] In the face of extremely complex subject matter, an optimal theory is unattainable. We have only to choose a relatively convenient theory and meet such complexity by using binary categories to break down problems.[18] Or as Ashby put it, no theory can come up with the "requisite variety" to match reality and completely master its complexity. But we can cast our theory into a form that reflects precisely this problem.

Of course the question remains whether this viewpoint is the only one from which to judge the structure of a theory. And, furthermore, there is the question whether this explicit concern with complexity produces particular side effects that in many ways curtail a theory's ability to grasp reality. One such side effect we have already mentioned: the need to repeat the gridwork within each of the squares of the original grid. Each of these squares represents a subsystem that itself can build four and only four subsystems, and

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according to the same functional scheme. The A-subsystem has not only an A-subsystem, but also a G-, I-, and L-subsystem as well. At every level of system-building there is a subsystem that displays the whole schema once again. That follows from Parsons' fundamental claim that only so can any action-system be constructed. But how far can this process be repeated? Is there a point past which it gives out? Does it become senseless after the second repetition, like the process of reflection? And, especially, is this the proper way to represent the structure of functional differentiation? Does this theoretical schema yield not structural complexity but only structural complications?[19] This question points to the way the constructive dichotomies (internal/external; instrumental/consummatory) insulate Parsons' theoretical scheme. The clarification of theoretical and conceptual issues becomes irrelevant for a theory like Parsons' which uses dichotomies only to construct the sorts of items which may appear in a grid. We cannot tell to what extent a closer analysis of these dichotomies may be useful for filling the boxes within the grid. But one thing is clear: such a move would limit or even destroy the synthetic power of the AGIL-grid.

Hence, the way in which Parsons' theory specifies the principles limiting its scope leads to significant disadvantages. It could not be otherwise. And that is why by itself it does not constitute an objection, at least so long as there are no other theories that outbid reality in complexity. But we must ask to what extent this structure is appropriate for incorporating important theoretical results, ending hopeless controversies, and relativizing or synthesizing conceptual oppositions. Insofar as the theory of the general action system has succeeded in these areas, we cannot retreat to a pre-Parsonian position, especially if we do not find the shape of Parsons' own theory fully satisfying.

In fact, Parsons' most important achievements lie precisely in the areas we have just mentioned (Alexander 1978). To treat structure and process, material and ideal factors, individuals and collectives, action and system as unanalyzable oppositions only indicates an ignorance of his work. This is especially true of theories that view single functional areas (e.g., the economy or politics) as inherently dominant in society. Parsons clearly went beyond the first stage in the development of sociological theory. This stage consisted in

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replacing theories that base society on a single factor with simple but obscure dichotomies (Eisenstadt and Curelaru 1976, p. 80f.). What Parsons did was to systematize these dichotomies. But anyone who does not accept Parsons' reorganization of sociological theory cannot return to the previous stage. At the very least, he would have to come up with new justifications for remaining at that stage. This is why Parsons' work remains a challenge to further work in sociological theory.

Parsons' theory is a milestone from another point of view as well. It has been the only attempt to begin with *a number of equally important functions* and then *to give a theoretical deduction of them.* No one else has dared to try this or even thought it was possible. Generally, theoretical sociologists proceed inductively. Anyone who is only astounded by the AGIL-schema, without accepting it, should still be aware of the weaknesses lying in a purely inductive procedure. If we view it simply as an empirical fact that our society is differentiated among functional systems for the economy, politics, science, education, religion, law, etc. we are giving up the theoretical possibility of independently judging this development. We shall then no longer be able to determine whether our society has pushed differentiation too far (which might well be the case).

It may be asked why all this is important if we do not trust the theory that has brought us to this point. But Parsons' attempt counts for something. He changed the situation in sociological theory. We can reject his efforts. But the question will remain whether his project was not possible after all.

IV

Whatever our eagerness for theoretical synthesis, there is one further question bearing on the future of Parsons' work that we must consider. Did his theoretical program take in the really important currents of his day? And if not, what was its relation to them?

Naturally, this question depends on what we take to be important. Nonetheless, there are clearly two theoretical developments in

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which the theory of the general, AGIL action-system can hardly play a part. These developments have to do with the problem of *self-reference* (section IV) and the problem of *complexity* (section V).

The problem of self-reference has its *locus classicus* in the theory of the subject. The subject was supposed to found itself, either as a condition of knowledge or as a way of intensifying the will and pleasure. In contrast to this "subjective" version of the problem of self-reference, there has recently been a burst of interest in self-reference as a structural feature of objective systems. The term "subject" implied that self-reference was *a condition for founding and intensifying a set of phenomena.* This made self-reference a somewhat marginal theoretical problem. Shifting the problem to the objective realm means that self-reference comes to be treated as a *condition for the efficient functioning* of systems. There are systems that have to set up self-referential mechanisms if they are to remain stable in view of a specific range of changes in their environments. Moreover, there are also systems (e.g., the nervous system, and also all social systems) that generally can react to their environments only by remaining in contact with themselves. In certain cases the self-referential compactness of a system even seems to be a condition for its being open to the environment. This is especially so whenever in relation to the normal processes in its environment the system represents an emergent order that cannot rely on those processes but must distance itself from them.

In a way similar to how Parsons developed his theory of the general action system, cybernetics seems to have changed its focus of research from causal or quasi-causal models to problems of morphogenesis and structural change. At the same time it took up the problem of self-reference.[20] It extended to all social systems the traditional epistemological problem that all cognitive processes refer at least in part to a domain of reality that they themselves have created (i.e., their own efforts to understand reality [Braten 1978]). But if every relation such a system has to its environment must involve a relation of the system to these environmental relations, then we must choose one of two alternatives: either we shall have to expand the concept of knowledge to cover all system/environment setups,[21] or we shall have to reconstruct the concept

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of knowledge as a special case, as one functionally specific form of the self-reference basic to all systems.

This kind of research is closely connected to the recent interest in the hierarchical structure of systems (Simon 1969; Mesarović and Takahara 1970; Pattee 1973). Here, "hierarchy" (and this goes for Parsons' idea of "cybernetic hierarchy") means not a chain of commands, but rather a set of levels or subsystems that, while maintaining a relative autonomy, are linked together only in particular respects. Hierarchy allows systems to develop relations of independence and dependence at the same time, to make simultaneous use of unity and diversity, and to combine reciprocity and asymmetry.[22] (Only the second term of these pairs implies the existence of an apex.) The function of a hierarchy lies in such "combinatorial gains"—and not in the power or representativity invested in the apex. Self-reference is involved in this phenomenon inasmuch as a hierarchical structure allows a system to treat itself as something complex or, more precisely, to organize for the sake of its own unity the way it maintains contact with itself.[23]

All of these recent developments in systems theory have not yet converged into a recognizable whole. It looks as if the unclarified logical problems underlying the concept of self-reference are blocking any attempt at a theoretical synthesis. One proposed solution to these problems is of special interest. It makes use of a conceptual framework that is based on the concept of "indication" and that assigns a fundamental role to the ideas of time and boundary.[24] With regard to time it postulates that the *repetition* of an indicative act brings together what both acts indicated; it condenses the object. Secondly, it postulates that crossing a *boundary* and then returning across it creates a situation that was not intended by either of these acts. These axioms serve to formulate the logical structures of indication in such a way that they encompass as well the indication of first-order indications. The theory then allows the conceptual possibility that an indication can reenter the domain of what it indicates. And, in turn, what is indicated can be adapted to meet this eventuality. For example, Epimenides' paradox could be solved by the rule that every Cretan who tells the truth loses his nationality. The rule could be set up with a view to this paradox.

Now it is surprising that the axioms of this theory appeal to what

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are the pattern variables (i.e., constructive dichotomies) of the AGIL-schema: time and the difference between system and environment. Is that by chance?[25] Or did these variables, as Parsons used them, have to be revised so that systems could be viewed as self-referential and Parsons' sociological theory could find a place in its own object-domain, the general action system? Only in this way could his theory then maintain its claim to universality.

This point brings us back to our original question: what is the future of Parsons' theory of the general action system? Continued interest in this theory will certainly depend on whether its fundamental orientation can remain in contact with new developments in the social sciences. The problem of self-reference could prove critical in just this regard. Parsons located self-reference in the individual subject that, as an agent determining its own needs, cannot be confused with a mechanism determined by external causes. This conception is a thoroughly traditional one.[26] But apart from this, the idea of self-reference does not appear in Parsons' work, unless we take the repetition of the AGIL-schema within each of its squares as a form of self-reference. That symbolically generalized media of exchange always subordinate the interchanges between a system and its environment to internal standards merely indicates that Parsons had self-reference in mind when speaking of symbolic generalization. Thus, there are such hints here and there, but they occur only sporadically without being integrated into his general theoretical approach.

Hence, one fundamental task must be to clarify whether a theory that limits itself by constructing grids can become at all a theory about self-referential systems. The similarity between Parsons' pattern variables and the dimensions covered by the axioms of Spencer-Brown and Varela is but a first indication. Parsons' incorporation of the idea of "cybernetic hierarchy" into his theory is a second, important indication. But the decisive question facing the use of grids would be, as always, how an analysis of the pattern variables can help to interpret what lies in the squares of the grid. In Parsons' theory the problems of self-reference would have to surface at the point in which he uses the grid to discuss *the consequences of differentiation*. This is where he discusses *interpenetration* and *interchange*. Only further research can decide whether this area of

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Parsons' theory can adequately accommodate recent work on the theory of self-referential systems. The concepts of interpenetration and media of exchange would then have to become, and rightly so, the kernel of his theory. In the AGIL-schema they express the internal guarantees for the autonomy of the action-system. On the other hand, these concepts show that the unity of the system lies precisely in differentiation. That is why the pattern variables are presented in the form of dichotomies—in contrast to how they appear in the theory of self-referential systems we mentioned above. Time appears as the difference between orientation toward the future and orientation toward the present. System-building appears as the difference between internal and external orientation. We should think through these decisions about theory-construction once again, since difference must always imply unity.

V

Parsons was aware that a theory must limit its scope if it is going to reduce the intractable complexity of the real world to a manageable form. This procedure he practiced first as "structural functionalism" and then as the AGIL-schema. The same insight also lies in the thesis that the concrete can form neither a system nor an object of knowledge, since every statement of interdependences requires selections to have been made. It must involve an analytical procedure (Ashby 1966). In order to formulate such ideas, sociological theory must make use of the conceptual resources of epistemology (even when appealing to "analytical realism"). It does not *need* a concept of complexity. But only that concept can enable it to reflect about its procedures in relation to the reality it studies.

Hence, the problem of complexity turns up in the object-domain of any theory dealing with systems or processes (e.g., knowledge, decisions) that refer to matters overtaxing their capabilities. The most important recent work in decision theory (or more generally, in the theory of problem-solving) has therefore explicitly incorporated the idea of complexity into its conceptual repertoire (Simon 1969; Gottinger 1978). Thus, for example, the concept of rationality or the acceptability of problem-solutions is no longer self-explan-

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atory but depends on the concept of complexity. Rationality has become the norm for dealing with complexity (Simon 1976, 1978a). To discover whether some actual behavior is rational, we must look at how it handles complexity (Luhmann 1968b).

This initially limited theoretical development does not lead merely to a sharper awareness of complexity. Rather, it makes it clear that complexity, like meaning, is a universal and fundamental phenomenon that arises both in reality and in our knowledge of reality. Thus, it affects not only the *relation* between knowledge and its object-domain, but also the construction (or "self-organization") of reality itself. If that is so, then a theory with universalistic pretensions and the ambition to reflect upon itself must develop a concept of complexity. For only in that way can such a theory trace both its object-domain and its own relationship to it back to a common problem. Any theory that views its own object-domain as involving the reduction of complexity, self-simplifications, the impossibility of "requisite variety," and second-best solutions[27] has in effect formulated an imperative binding upon itself as well. Given that such a theory is not questioning its own knowledge-claims, it cannot avoid applying this knowledge to itself.

At this level of reflection we can combine two fundamental interests underlying Parsons' theoretical program that have appeared to be separate: the *methodological* effort to give his theory systematic coherence by means of "analytical realism," and the "Hobbesian problem of order" that formed the starting-point for the *content* of his theory.[28] The first concern was that social reality can construct interdependences (i.e., systems) only by selecting certain aspects of things; and sociological theory has to develop along these lines as well, for only so can it come to be coherent. The second concern was that social order does not have to be instituted against self-interest.[29] It is always already given, since the selective combination of components making up an action has itself a normative structure. Both claims can be interpreted as giving the conditions for selectivity and order. These conditions together form a structural property of complexity. They arise from the fact that a large number of elements can be combined only by means of selections (Luhmann 1975c).

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This new formulation of Parsons' theory allows us to link it up with recent developments in cybernetic systems theory. It brings to light a unity in the general theory of action-systems that has remained inaccessible to that theory itself. It clarifies some fundamental choices underlying this theory, allowing us to formulate once again the question responsible for them. This question is: have we adequately understood the selectivity which all complexity necessitates, when we conceive of it epistemologically or methodologically as "analysis" and, at the level of action, as normative orientation or values?

Once we have posed this question, we cannot avoid the impression that the unity of Parsons' theoretical program comes into view precisely around the issue where we may indeed begin to think about alternatives.

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PART II

4

Interaction, Organization, and Society

One of the main purposes of theory construction is to regulate the relationship between the *precision* of concepts or theoretical hypotheses and the *range* of their empirical applicability. The imprecision of a concept increases in direct proportion to the amplitude of its subject matter. This rule is extremely important for the practical orientation of science. As a discipline becomes more highly developed and the knowledge contained within it more specialized, the more difficult it becomes to arrive at an all-inclusive conception that is still scientifically defensible. Progress, in other words, seems to lead into a maze of disconnected details. The integration of a discipline, on the other hand, is regularly abandoned to speculatively inclined "entrepreneurs" who dispense with the usual professional standards while deftly evading supervision and criticism. At best, they succeed in launching short-lived conceptual fashions that stimulate research without being able to guide it effectively. In sum, theoretical synopsis seems hopelessly amateurish, while the mere quantitative growth of knowledge is marred by disconnectedness. Both defects are forms of arbitrariness.

Every attempt at general theory in sociology is forced to confront this problem. Today, universal claims are made most forcefully for a general theory of sociocultural evolution and for a general theory

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of social systems. Because of their highly abstract nature, both theories have been accused (and not without reason) of becoming devoid of all content and scientifically worthless. Indeed, a sociological study of the current state of sociology could not overlook the contrast between "speculative entrepreneurs" and researchers interested solely in narrow empirical issues. These two approaches, unfortunately, are too remote from one another to cooperate in a meaningful division of labor. As a result of this schism, in fact, sociology as a discipline suffers from recurrent "system crises." This uncomfortable situation, moreover, has encouraged some sociologists to strike a third posture: the escape into normative "commitment" and sociopolitical *engagement.*

Given this unsatisfying state of the discipline, it is urgent to ask how we can translate highly general concepts into theories useful for empirical research without sacrificing their unifying and integrating function. It is the purpose of this article to analyze and clarify this problem, taking as an example the general theory of social systems.

I

We can speak of a "social system" whenever the actions of several persons are meaningfully interrelated and are thus, in their very interconnectedness, marked off from an environment. As soon as any communication whatsoever takes place among individuals, social systems emerge. From the outset, each process of communication has a history distinguished by the fact that, on the basis of a single set of interrelated choices, only a few out of a wide array of possibilities are actualized. Environments always offer more possibilities than any system can successfully exploit. In this sense, environments are necessarily more complex than systems themselves. Social systems, as a result, constitute themselves through processes of self-selection, just as living creatures constitute themselves through processes of "autocatalysis." In other words, both their initial formation and their subsequent survival presuppose a reduction or diminution of all those things which are, in principle, possible.

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If one accepts this thesis as a starting point, there arises straightaway a convenient rule for the construction of "system types." Social systems can assume three distinct shapes according to the diverse presuppositions under which processes of self-selection and boundary-formation occur. On this basis, indeed, we can distinguish *interaction* systems, *organization* systems, and *societal* systems. This triadic distinction corresponds to the most important centers of gravity in current sociological research: the theory of face-to-face behavior or symbolically mediated interaction, the theory of organizations, and (admittedly only feebly developed) approaches to a theory of society. Systems theory can relativize and integrate these three distinct avenues of sociological research. As a consequence, it becomes impossible to construe any single one of the three system perspectives as either absolute or self-sufficient. Even the theory of society as a theory of the all-encompassing social system is, from this perspective, confronted with its own limitations. It is concerned, to be sure, with the overarching whole, but it must recognize that this whole will never be investigated wholly or exhaustively.

1. Interaction systems emerge when *present individuals perceive one another*. This includes the perception of mutual perception. "Personal presence" is the selection principle as well as the boundary-formation principle governing interaction systems. Whoever is not present does not belong to the system, no matter how intimate his relations to the on-the-spot participants may otherwise be.

Here are some examples of interaction systems: supper with the family (in counterdistinction to the family itself), a single cabinet meeting (not the regime as such), standing in line at a theater box office, a poker game, a mass demonstration, a prize fight, a taxi trip. In each of these cases, those who are present enjoy preferential consideration, if only because they might cause trouble or suddenly do something weird and unexpected. Comparatively speaking, concern for those who are absent diminishes, regardless of how powerful or well loved they happen to be. The tangible boundary of interaction systems is revealed by the fact that we can only speak *with* but not *about* those who are present, and conversely, only *about* but not *with* those who are absent. With whom we speak

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about whom, as everyone knows, makes a vast difference for our choice of topics.

Language makes it possible, inside interaction systems, to deal with those who are absent, that is, to mirror and thematize aspects of the environment within the system by replacing actual presence with signs representing those who are absent. A symbolically abridged version of the environment, so to speak, is incorporated within the system. In this manner, relations between systems and environments can be prodigiously enriched and intensified. Most important of all, these relations can be extended into the past and the future. As a result, they can no longer take the form of a point-by-point correlation between the system and its environment. The decisive advantage of human interaction over animal interaction stems from this elemental achievement of language.

To be sure, this very same advantage of human interaction also imposes powerful restrictions. At any given moment, for example, only one of the individuals present can do the talking. At the very least, the intelligibility and coordination of various contributions would suffer greatly and lapse very quickly toward nullity if several participants spoke up at the same time and obstinately prattled on. This means that interaction systems, because of an overriding need for internal order, must be focused (at any given time) on a single topic which stands at the center of common interest. A plurality of topics can only be handled sequentially. As a result, interlocutors must either restrict their contributions to what is currently being discussed or try to change the subject. This can involve tacit power struggles for control of center-stage and the attention of other participants. Thus, even at this most elementary level of face-to-face interaction, *there exists no social system within which life chances are distributed equally.*

Most important of all, the demand for thematic focus and concentration is a *time consuming* structural principle. All contributions are forced into sequential form. This takes time. Moreover, the linear form of a sequence can actually be disadvantageous for coordinating those communicated messages that have a highly complex subject matter. All in all, systems operating under such narrow structural constraints cannot attain a very high degree of complexity

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either with regard to their own possibilities or in their relations to their environments.

2. There is no escaping these constraints on the level of simple face-to-face interaction. This can be accomplished only by ascending to systems of another type, systems which *can be detached not, indeed, from interaction itself but at least from the constraints on system formation operative at the level of face-to-face interaction.* Such independence is achieved by social systems of the type *society.*

Society can be classically defined as the all-embracing (and therefore independent or autarchic) social system. It does not, however, necessarily include all actions that objectively exist, much less all human beings. A more precise definition is the following: *society is the comprehensive system of all reciprocally accessible communicative actions.* Today, there is only one societal system—society is world society. Earlier, the situation was quite different. As a consequence, we need a concept which can denote both the overarching singleness and the irreducible multiplicity of societal systems.

Society, first of all, is not merely the sum or aggregate of all personal interactions. Rather, it is a system of a higher order or of another type. Society, in fact, must also be capable of coordinating possible communication among or with those who, in any single case, are absent. Its regulative principle cuts clean across the boundaries of interaction systems and makes itself independent of their parochial principles of boundary-formation and self-selection. The boundaries of society are the boundaries of possible meaningful communication, notably the boundaries set by accessibility and understandability. Such limits are much more abstract and, as cultural history shows, much more vaguely defined than the boundaries of interaction systems.

In contrast to this deliberately loose concept of the unity of society, traditional European thought construed society more narrowly as a politically and legally integrated system, as a *societas civilis.* Even today many sociologists, notably Talcott Parsons, refuse to give up the old normative conception of society. From their viewpoint, the unity of society is constituted by the common recognition

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of an ineliminable repertoire of shared norms. Unfortunately, such an appeal to common norms entails a considerable overestimation of the consensus that is structurally necessary today as well as the consensus that actually exists. This theoretical precommitment to "normative integration," moreover, forces us to say that even a slave, even a criminal, and even a hippie "ultimately recognize and accept" the prevailing values of society.

All sociologists, of course, know that the criminal *qua* criminal leads a social existence. But this is not merely because he conceals his offense with an eye to norms and policemen, but also because he *wants* to do what is forbidden. There exists a specific "logic of evil" endemic to society. It cannot be exiled beyond society's borders. As a consequence, normative consensus cannot provide an adequate foundation for the entire societal system. Instead, this foundation can only be located in the *disjunction* between conformist and deviant behavior and in the attendant discrimination of appropriate behavioral expectations and reactions.

A concept of society geared toward *possible communication* has the further advantage of leaving room for history. This does not mean merely that the concept we have proposed is abstract enough to cover the historical multiplicity of societal formations. Over and above such generality, the concept in question provides a principle for tracing historical development. Every act of communication, by setting in motion a back and forth process of "reciprocal selection," necessarily leads to the erection of structures which (in turn) function as conditions for the possibility of future communication. A theory of sociocultural evolution would have to summarize the conditions under which such processes lead to the construction of complex societal systems. Only societies can be "carriers" of evolutionary processes.

Evolution, in other words, is simultaneously a binding *to* history and an emancipation *from* history. It always builds upon preexistent achievements while concurrently making society independent of the preconditions of its own initial genesis. Present-day scientific research, for example, no longer relies on those peculiar theological, economic, and technical conditions which first made possible the autonomy of science in the early modern era. Rather, it

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now depends much more simply and directly on routinized expectations of success that have been firmly established in the interim.

Unlike what occurs in systems of elementary interaction, society's "casting off" of its own history cannot be a simple matter of forgetting. Instead, it must be a process of functional substitution. Society, because it contains every possible communication, is a self-substituting order. It must affix all changes and transformation directly onto the pregiven system. In contrast to systems of face-to-face interaction, society cannot simply come to a stop and start all over again.

3. Finally, in complex social orders, a third type of social system has acquired increasingly greater significance. This is the type called "organization" which, in numerous sectors of social life is (so to speak) inserted between the societal system and individual interaction systems. Organizations represent a fully distinct development. They incorporate new principles of boundary-formation and self-selection and can be reduced neither to interaction nor to society.

We can label as "organized" those social systems which link membership to specific conditions, that is, which make entrance and exit dependent upon such conditions. We begin with the premise that the behavioral requirements of an organization and the behavioral motives of its members can vary independently of one another, but that, in certain circumstances, they can also be conjoined into relatively long lasting constellations. With the help of such impersonal membership rules (for example, submission to authority in exchange for wages) it becomes possible, in spite of voluntarily chosen and shifting membership, to stabilize highly "artificial" modes of behavior over a long stretch of time. All that is required is that a general balance be struck between the attractiveness of the system and the demands made on individual behavior. The organization will then not be dependent on the creation of spontaneous personal motives or moral commitment and consensus for every action required. Motives are "generalized" through membership: soldiers march, secretaries type, professors publish, and political leaders govern—whether it happens, in this situation, to please them or not.

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It is possible to institute (in the form of membership rules) impersonally defined offices, restrictions on communication, spheres of competence, special rights to deploy resources and assume responsibilities, chains of command, and routines for inspection and supervision. And the individual member of an organization can be precommitted to a *global or indiscriminant* recognition of all these arrangements. He can even be obliged to accept procedural rules for changing the conditions of membership in the organization. In other words, organizations make possible not only material (i.e., content-related) but also temporal generalization, not only the coexistence of a wide range of actions but also a high degree of flexibility and the capacity to adapt to changed circumstances. Of course, all of this only occurs under the general proviso that membership remain palpably more advantageous than nonmembership.

Obviously enough, there are limits (as there are in any type of system) to what can be achieved in this way. We know, for example, that organizations function less successfully in the service sector than in the production sector, and on higher levels of administrative bureaucracy than on lower levels. They also function less successfully under conditions of business prosperity and full employment than in an economy with a surplus labor force. It is beyond question, in any case, that only organizations are capable of producing the motivational generalization and the behavioral specification required in several of modern society's most important functional domains.

II

We are now in a position to summarize our remarks thus far and to introduce the second part of our discussion.

The general theory of social systems can do no more than formulate very abstract concepts and "limiting conditions" for the analysis of social reality. Nevertheless, it can clarify how (in principle) social systems constitute themselves through processes of self-selection and boundary-formation. This constitutive process always takes place under specific conditions. As a result, distinct types of system emerge which cannot be reduced to one another.

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Not all social systems are "personal interactions," not all are "societies," and (most emphatically) not all are "organizations." As a result, sociological theories parochially attached to any single one of the three basic types of system can have only a limited range of empirical applicability. None of them can grasp the length, breadth, and depth of social reality. Even the all-embracing system of society, although it *contains* the other types of system, is not their prototype.

Such a research program (or high altitude "mapping" of the field of sociological inquiry) follows quite logically from the very concept of a system. It is not, of course, free of all major difficulties and complications. Nevertheless, it does seem to provide a realistic access to social reality. In this second section we shall examine three conditions under which the advantages of such a research program can be realized. We shall first consider two topics commonly said to be beyond the pale of systems theory: social change and conflict.

1. We can define sociocultural evolution by reference to the increasing separation or differentiation between interaction systems, organizational systems, and societal systems. Consider the beginning and end points of this development. In the simplest archaic social orders, interaction, organization, and society are virtually identical. Tribal society consists of all those interactions that are visible and accessible to individual members of the tribe. As does an organization, a tribe both expels individuals (those who are not sufficiently accommodating) and recruits individuals (chiefly through marriage). Interaction, organization, and society are structurally interwoven and mutually restricting. As anthropologists have frequently observed, the boundaries and self-identification of these societies are correspondingly vague.

It would be impossible, by contrast, for the world society developing today to assume anything like the form of a unified organization—if only because the motivational mechanism of an organization presupposes voluntary and contingent membership—a realistic chance for entrance and exit. The movement toward a single world society, as a result, necessarily presupposes a divorce between the societal and the organizational types of system. Interaction systems and societal systems are even more emphatically wrenched apart.

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The basic reality of society can no longer be said to lie in its capacity to generate and sustain interaction systems. As a consequence, modern society cannot be grasped as the aggregate sum of daily personal encounters. This is expressed, for example, in the gulf separating the ethics of face-to-face interaction from objective social requirements in (say) economics, politics, or science. In view of this discrepancy, moralistic demands for more "personal participation" in social processes are hopelessly out of touch with social reality. Their only function may be to signal the fact that the discrepancy is indeed perceived.

Between the extremes of primitive society and world society stretches the epoch of regionally limited high cultures to which we owe our cultural heritage. It was characteristic of this epoch that societies reached a size and complexity that definitively surpassed the narrow boundaries of interaction accessible to on-the-scene individuals. In urban centers, organizations had already emerged, notably for religious, political, military, and commercial functions and for specialized productive tasks. But the influence of organizations on daily life was still relatively slight and, conversely, society itself was still conceived as "a political organization," as a corporation capable of action. Although a moral integration of society could no longer be attained, it was still possible (at least in the dominant social strata) to conceive of such moral integration as the keystone of one's personal ethics on the level of interaction. The differentiation between types of system was already begun, but the process was not yet irreversible.

From this highly abstract perspective, social change or sociocultural evolution can be characterized by reference to an increasing differentiation of the "levels" on which system formation occurs. This, of course, is no adequate theory of evolution. Nevertheless, it focuses our attention on an important facet of evolution and one that correlates with other aspects. To the extent that such a differentiation between levels or types is actually achieved, social reality becomes more complex. At the same time, the three distinct types of system can assume separate functions and set themselves off from one another more sharply. Interactions no longer need to do double duty as organizations or as society (and vice versa). As a result, within the newly disencumbered sphere of interaction, the

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concrete capacity for human empathy and thoughtful awareness of others (in the form, for example, of intimate relations) can be enhanced in an extraordinary and unprecedented way. This can occur as soon as personal interaction is no longer freighted with society-integrating expectations of "normality." The organizational regulation of behavior, moreover, can make enormous headway when organizations have been differentiated from each other and from the rest of society. This allows them to be indifferent to the other social roles of their members, for instance, to religious belief, political activity, family condition, or neighborly relations. Finally, the entire societal order can attain the utmost complexity only when, as a system, it is no longer coresponsible for the reduction or abridgement of possibilities performed by organizations and personal interactions. This comes about, for example, when a societal system no longer must guarantee a corporatively organized or collective capacity for unified and purposive group action. A highly complex society must limit itself to making possible, in a very loose and general sense, the *compatibility* of the disparate functions and structures of all its subsidiary units or parts.

2. We now come to our next problem: a total disjunction of the three levels of system formation is doubtless impossible, since all social action obviously takes place in society and is ultimately possible only in the form of interaction. As system levels become progressively more separate, as the three system types become increasingly distinct, problems related to interconnecting the dissociated levels become more and more acute.

Here are a few examples:

When organizations are conceived and planned in an increasingly rational fashion and constructed with an eye to optimal efficiency in a specific domain, it becomes much more difficult to accomplish through interaction everything which has been rendered possible organizationally. Interaction, so to speak, follows its own "system laws" and does not slavishly implement the program laid down by the organization. Organizational plans and directives are evaded, distorted, redefined, or intentionally derailed at the level of interaction. The slack relation between official Church dogma and ordinary confessional practice (reflected for centuries in moral "casuistics") offers a good example of this process of routine deviation.

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Official church doctrine—within which dogmas declared obligatory by authoritative Church organizations are interpreted and systematized—is deformed in the confessional under the pressure of an immediate communicative situation. In many cases, it is simply impossible to proffer aloof dogmatic instruction while engaging oneself with the individual penitent. There are rules, even handbooks full of rules, for the solution of this conflict. Unfortunately, they remain dogmatically precarious and unconvincing. Hence, there is no rush to make them public. They are sometimes even denounced officially by the church as demonic and labeled with such damning epithets as "laxism" and "probabilism."

In a society where organizations have been introduced into almost all functional domains, this problem becomes universally relevant. It is not a question, one should note, of disobedience or tacit resistance and noncompliance on the part of subordinates. Indeed, even those in command fall victim to the inherent limitations of their own interaction—not infrequently to the despair of their subordinates. A voluminous report on the structural reform of the German federal government and administration, published in 1969, deals with this problem in the case of the highest agency of the regime, the cabinet. A cabinet meeting, too, is just another interaction system within which (for example) only one topic can be discussed at a time. Such a meeting is characterized by a sequential mode of operation, a "costly" expenditure of time, a limited complexity in the subject-matter under discussion, and a corresponding bottleneck or logjam in the flow of information. As a result, conscientious subordinates frequently rack their brains for ways of preventing the face-to-face interaction of their bosses from obstructing what is organizationally possible and thus from ruining well-laid plans.

A second group of examples concerns the relation between organizations and societies. It is striking, first of all, that in highly complex societies none of the central functions of the societal system can be assumed by a unified organization—and today even less so than before. Given our economic system, for instance, production and consumption choices could never be yoked together into an organizationally unified decision-making process, even if we were to succeed in integrating all organizations of production within an

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all-embracing system of world-wide planning. Likewise, the functions of education will remain divided up between the school system and the family, although the emphasis may shift. In complex societies, moreover, political functions are not fulfilled solely by governmental and administrative bureaucracies. They require, in addition, specifically political organizations—such as parties and interest groups—which fall outside the "state apparatus" in the narrow sense. Even the historically well-established identity of Church organization with the religious system as a whole has encountered (precisely on account of this traditional identification) notorious difficulties in adapting to the complex social situation of today.

All of this suggests that societal functions cannot be integrally delegated to a single or unified organization. Instead, such functions must be parcelized and respecified before being assigned to specific organizations. Thus, the relations between economics and politics or between politics and education are not the only sociostructural problems which have to be faced. Such problems also exist inside single subsystems, for instance, in the relation between parental and school education or between politics in the strict sense and the administrative bureaucracy. In addition, coordination achieved via direct interaction is indispensable inside the variety of distinct organizations in any single functional sector. Political planning, for instance, requires concrete face-to-face contact between politicians and top bureaucrats. Thus, the abovementioned "bottleneck problem" surfaces here once again, and without being susceptible to any organizational solution.

The converse side of this impossibility of delegating major societal functions en bloc to single organizations is that such broad functions cannot be adequately mirrored or understood within the narrow limits of organizations. Neither the leeway for varying societal functions nor the conditions for the compatibility of their divergent ways of being fulfilled can be adequately expressed at the level of organizational goals and criteria. The function of religion cannot be formulated as a dogma. The function of law is certainly not a norm. The function of politics is not a standard of legitimacy. The "limits to economic growth" is a possible conference topic, but it cannot help entrepreneurs and enterprises decide

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what they ought to do. Even in science (including organized sociological research) the criteria for choosing methods and for accepting and rejecting hypotheses contribute nothing to mirroring and comprehending the function of science in society. Moreover, we must assume that this discrepancy increases, rather than decreases, with the continuing consolidation of scientific research.

This "reflection deficit" of organizations is particularly conspicuous because it coincides with a maximum degree of differentiated sensibility, of analytical ability, and of organized capacity for processing information. One cannot escape this insufficiency by leaping into world views that do not require reflection or that, like Marxism, already have reflection behind them. What remains unexplored, however, is the possibility of relativizing reflection on total society and on organized decision-making and mediating them with one another through an awareness of their discrepancy. Perhaps social science itself is in the best position to perform such relativizing and mediating, if only because its own operating criteria have such a weak organizational basis.

3. The significance of an increasing differentiation of system levels and system types can be particularly well illustrated by reference to the special problem of *conflict.* We can speak of conflict whenever one participant in an interaction refuses to accept the choices or selections of another, *and communicates this refusal.* For the concept of conflict itself, it is irrelevant whether the initial presumption of acceptance was based on truth, love, legal or moral norms, or on superior power. What is crucial is the employment of a "negation potential" for refusing choices the acceptance of which had been previously expected. As a result, neither the mere existence of class structure nor the functional differentiation of society are (as such) already conflicts. But they can be described as circumstances "pregnant with conflict." It thus becomes appropriate to investigate under what additional conditions an outbreak of conflict is likely to occur.

We shall begin by analyzing conflict at the level of face-to-face interaction. Here, when a proposed choice is refused, there are special difficulties. Such a refusal is particularly problematic because systems based on personal presence operate under the premise that a consensus exists about what subject is being discussed.

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At any given time, only one central topic can be handled. As soon as conflict, through the very act of refusal, becomes *the* focal theme, the entire system is correspondingly restructured. Thereafter, the participants react to this new topic and the ensuing controversy limits what is possible within the system. Interaction systems cannot easily consign open conflicts to a marginal status within their borders. They are not complex enough for this. They are faced with a choice: they can either avoid conflicts or be conflicts.

Archaic societies, which are structurally similar to interaction systems, find themselves subject to analogous restrictions. They are constantly faced with the alternative of either repressing conflict or having an open struggle flare up which may suddenly turn violent. Their procedures for applying pressure and for effecting reconciliation are designed to solve this problem. As a result, they can only develop primitive forms of societal differentiation. These forms are effective in repressing conflicts and also relatively impervious to acts of violence or successions. Results of this sort are achieved through segmentary differentiation according to household, sex, residential communities, settlements, and so forth.

All further advances in social evolution presuppose a two-faceted increase in the potential for society-wide conflict: an increase both in social potential for *producing* conflicts by communicating refusal and in the social potential for *tolerating* conflicts as continuing events that only need to be resolved in critical cases. As complexity increases, so does the differentiation of interests and perspectives, as do occasions and structural opportunities for negation. The social order must now provide for the eventuality that legal norms will be changed as well as for the fact that an exchange of gifts can be refused without mortifying offense, that established truths will be doubted, and that someone may stay away from a religious ceremony without thereby wounding the feelings of his neighbors or even having to withdraw from the religious community. The chance to consistently follow various special interests also depends upon an increase in readily employable "negation potential." The same can be said for the engine of social development: the possibility of transforming and varying the given. Finally, the structural principle of organizations presupposes increased social mobility and the ever-present option of breaking off and freshly entering into social

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relations. In sum, differentiation, innovation, and organization can all be said to depend upon *a normalization or routinization of conflict behavior.*

One solution to the problem of conflict lies in a wider dissociation between interaction systems and societal systems. One consequence of separating interaction and society is that society becomes independent of the mode of conflict characteristic of its interaction systems. It can, without threatening its own continuity, employ the interruption of interaction as a mechanism for conflict resolution. It can also, notably in its legal system, establish distinct contexts of interaction which specialize in handling disputes and conflicts. In general, social tolerance for conflict can be increased simply by limiting the degree to which conflict is allowed to spread. Competition in the marketplace, heated ideological controversies, career rivalry in the micropolitics of organizations—none of these conflicts excludes being invited for dinner together or standing next to one another in a reception line. The fact that we no longer depend on concrete forms of a "common life" eases the breaking off as well as the keeping up of social relations in cases of conflict.

On the other hand, this very separation means that an elevation of conflicts into the wider arena of total society requires a more or less artificial (that is, political) aggregation of interests. The parties involved must be made aware of their class situation. It may even be hammered into them as a presupposition for participating in the putative class struggle. This is a ripe area for the theory of mass social movements. Such movements, as historical processes of selective self-propulsion and self-augmentation, come about under varying conditions. They construct their own presuppositions in a step-by-step manner. Thus, they attain their dynamism and developmental direction from their own history. The maelstrom of interaction conflicts into which mass movements can easily develop follows from the artificiality of interest coalitions as well as from the historical elimination of other less violent options. In relation to the entire volume of interaction, total societal conflicts in complex societies become decidedly less frequent and decidedly more perilous.

This picture can be completed by attending to conflict management within organizations. Organizations subordinate all members

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to hierarchical modes of conflict management and conflict resolution. The acceptance of these techniques is an obligation attached to membership. Organizations distinguish between internal and external conflicts and divorce conflicts pertinent to the organization from other conflicts of the organization's members. While on duty, we must not take revenge on our private enemies. We must neither give low grades to the children of our political opponents nor, conversely, prevent a teacher from withdrawing cash from his bank account simply because he has handed out low grades. Correspondingly, it is a typical membership duty of organizations that internal conflicts—for example, differences of opinion among senior faculty members about junior promotions—are concealed from external view. The extent to which these precepts are realized in practice is, of course, an empirical question. There is no doubt, however, that with the help of the novel type of system called "organization," conflicts are made possible and regulated to a degree inconceivable solely on the basis provided by interaction and society.

III

The analytical technique underlying this article was characterized at the outset as relatively complex. Up to now, however, we have followed a rather simple pattern of analysis. We first emphasized the process of self-selection and boundary-formation and, on this foundation, distinguished three types of social system: interaction, organization, and society. Their differentiation, of course, was not presented as a purely conceptual matter, but rather was interpreted as a product of sociocultural evolution. The distinction of three types of system, in other words, was historically relativized. Thereupon, we were able to briefly sketch out a few *examples* of how, in the face of changing conditions and the increasing complexity of society, these types of system were separated, specified, and (as a result) enabled to relieve each other's functional burdens. Even as it stands, this analysis already goes beyond what can be achieved within a theoretical framework narrowly abridged to fit only a single type of system, either interaction or society. Nevertheless, in one important respect this way of viewing things is still

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much too simple. It omits the "nesting" of the diverse types of system within one another.

Actions, as selective processes, can belong simultaneously to a plurality of systems. They can take their orientation from a number of distinct system/environment references. Social systems, in other words, are not necessarily mutually exclusive—as are things in space. Thus, every interaction and every organization also belongs to society, and an interaction can (although it need not) belong to an organization. A faculty meeting, for example, is an interaction system in its own right, with a short history and its own unique horizon of possibilities and series of choices. Concurrently, it is a system in an organization that, in turn, is a suborganization in a larger organization that, in turn, belongs to the educational subsystem of society.

In such a model, the broader or more inclusive systems are relevant for the included systems in a twofold way. (1) They provide specific structural premises on the basis of which a self-selective process can occur while limiting this process in its possibilities; (2) they simultaneously impose order on the proximate environment of the subsystem. In this *double* effect of incorporating on incorporated systems lies *the condition for the freedom* of system developments.

Let us return to our example of the faculty meeting. A single interaction system of this sort presupposes, among other things, obligations to participate and a set of procedural rules. The meeting does not take place by accident, for example, but is scheduled beforehand. Moreover, everyone knows who is dean even before the meeting begins. Such a gathering also presupposes diverse "matters of course" such as the fact that all the participants have watches keeping approximately the same time. Resources and restrictions provided by the wider or more embracing systems, in other words, limit what is possible in local interaction systems. Only on the basis of such limitations, in fact, do specific expectations about behavior or results have a chance to emerge and survive. To this should be added the fact that the same overarching system which provides the conditions for these possibilities within an interaction system also imposes order on the proximate environment of this system. Such an ordered environment, for instance, guar-

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antees that committee resolutions have addressees, that students and doctoral candidates are interested in studying and in doctorates, that there are newspapers in which job announcements can be published, and so forth.

Only because the environment in which interaction occurs is prepatterned by society and by organizations is it possible for interaction systems to slip out from under alien premises and to tolerate the derailment of structural provisions. Against formal procedural rules, for example, there can be mobilized (in concrete situations) a moral pressure based on the assumption that all participants are interested in reciprocal esteem, or at least that they would be unwilling to say they are not interested in it. Or we can decide to circumvent all procedures, to displace interaction from the educational system into the political system, and on an appropriate occasion to send an indignant telegram to a foreign embassy. My point is that such decisions can be carried out only under the assumptions that the telecommunication services are functioning and that the embassy really is an embassy. Any structure of society which is rejected at home must be affirmed in the environment, or vice versa. A "total critique" remains without consequences, since protests require addressees.

This extreme example, chosen on purpose, allows us to see that freedom of movement in interaction systems depends upon the loose or imperfect coordination of wider and more embracing systems. Perfect interdependence of everything with everything is impossible in societies and emphatically impossible in complex societies. Perfect interdependence is supplanted by the double impact of structural and environmental preconditions on subsystems. This precarious relation of dependence/independence makes possible the constitution of social systems *within* more encompassing systems. The more restricted or local systems follow *distinct* self-selection and boundary-formation principles and instantiate different system types than the overarching system. Total society not only remains compatible with both organizations and interactions; it is their ordered and prepatterned environment. It also guarantees the maintenance of conditions for the possibility of further structural developments.

Naturally enough, the hints and suggestions I have provided thus

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far can become theories only in the narrow sense (and thereby become scientifically interesting) in the course of further development: that is, only when it can be shown how system structures vary under specific environmental conditions and which possible selections are thereby made accessible to system processes. Only then can we pose subtle questions, for example: does an *organizationally* imposed principle of majority rule, for which there may be a structural basis in the *societal system*, still permit moral argumentation at the level of *interaction*? Questions of this sort, however, are no longer formulable for every interaction, every organization, or every society—not to speak of every social system. They presuppose narrow restrictions on what is relevant. Correspondingly, the results of such subtle research can only be generalized in a modest way.

By speaking about "the theory of systems," we do not mean to imply that it is desirable to grind out highly abstract statements about systems in general. What is decisive is that, from an abstract theoretical basis with relatively *simple* means, *highly complex* research programs can be formulated which stand in an adequate relation to the complexity of social reality. This postulate is a "temporalized" version of the old problem of unity in diversity or, as Leibniz formulated it, of the greatest possible order in the greatest possible multiplicity.

Systems theory solves this problem in an exemplary way through the elementary postulate of a universally applicable concept of "system." The fundamental claim is that a system constitutes itself through a process of autocatalysis or self-selection by reference to its difference from an environment. In this way, the direction of a system's specification or specialization is announced in advance. Such a process demands the incorporation of special premises of boundary-formation and structure-building. This is where the development of types comes in. Through the construction of only three types of social system (interaction, organization, and society) and through the acceptance of only two relativizations (the evolution of the distinct types of system and coordinated environmental perspectives), there already emerges a highly complex conception of social reality which can no longer be evaluated in terms of what is easily pictured.

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But if such appraisal is not possible, where lies the motivation for accepting a research proposal of this sort?

Modern science itself is a social system, a subsystem of society, and (as a result) motives internal to it deviate from what is otherwise socially commonplace or usual. Because of an immensely increased capacity for analysis or "decomposition," the world of science has become extraordinarily complex. This of course has consequences for the choice of research programs. In respect to subject matter, such choices *cannot* be based on immediate insight or on the purported evidence of "direct experience." Likewise, in a temporal dimension, they *cannot* be based on any kind of prior certainty about the truth of research results. Instead, we must remain open to the possibility of error or falsehood. As a consequence, we need alternative criteria for choosing research programs. One such criterion can be furnished by a program's general capacity to incorporate and build upon preceding research. Another criterion is provided by the complexity of the program's conceptual and methodological apparatus for exposing its theories to examination and revision. The approach presented here tries to be adequate on both accounts, that is, it tries to reconstruct problems posed by previous research on a level of higher complexity. The philosophy of science may discuss whether or not such criteria are meaningful. The fruitfulness of a research program, however, can only be demonstrated by detailed research.

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5

Positive Law and Ideology

I. Action Theory and Systems Theory

During the last two hundred years, our confidence in the ability of the law to order social and political reality has decreased to a surprising extent. The grand age of natural law, with its attempt to depict the relation between man and society as basically a legal one, now lies far behind us. Not even Marx's ambivalent attitude toward the problem of law and ideology can be adopted with any conviction. Marx viewed law as the tool of an ideology, as an expression of the economic interests of a ruling class, and yet he believed that simply by altering the law and permitting expropriation a social revolution could be achieved and a social order free of ideology could be established. Since then, sociological theory and research have greatly enhanced our insight into the complexity of social systems—so much so, in fact, that it is now almost impossible to locate the essence and the distinctive features of different social orders in particular aspects of the law. Too many variables are involved, of which law is only one. A sociological theory of law is thus long overdue. Clarifying the relation between law and ideology could be one of its main tasks.

In order to get at the origin of this development, in which law has dwindled to being one source of order among others, we must

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look back at the period before the heyday of natural law. We must ask whether at the beginning, in the legal thought of classical Greece, decisions were not made that today make possible an opposition between law and ideology and that let the relation between them appear as one of either causal or normative domination. Greek thought went beyond traditionally sanctioned law by looking for its underlying principle, and this principle of justice was characterized, mythically but also rationally, as equality. This was an idea of great indeterminacy, leaving wide latitude for interpretation. It could have led to a structural theory of society. But with Aristotle the path from mythical to rational thought took a different turn. Both the theory of justice and the theory of society were worked out on the basis of a theory of right action, and the rightness of an action was judged according to its culmination, its goal.* The detailed development that the concept of justice then underwent depended upon its having been made a part of ethics. This explains why the description of politically constituted society was approached from the viewpoint of a theory of action: only in relation to the goal of an individual's action do other men appear as threatening or cooperative. On the basis of this approach, traditional political philosophy acquired its two chief problems of "threat" and "dependence," its conception of needs (*metus et indigentia*) and its conception of the corresponding goals of politically constituted society (*pax et justitia*). With changing emphasis, these conceptions have shaped the history of legal and political thought and are still to be found in sociology as in the contrast between cooperation and conflict. Binary concepts of this sort betray an approach based on a theory of action.

Nevertheless, even this narrowing of focus allows more complexity into social theory than can be handled with strictly logical means. As a result, the significance and the goals of human action have for a long time formed an object-domain unamenable to treatment by the exact methods of scientific knowledge. Finally, in modern times, under the pressure of increasing demands for intersubjective verifiability, the possibility of acquiring truth in this area has been altogether lost: the goals of human action cannot be

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* With a few exceptions we have translated "*Zweck*" by "goal" in this essay. [translators' note]

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proven true or false. In place of ethical theories of society that attempted to attribute to the agent goals and right action there have arisen new theories that seek to show that the existence of society is independent of the "subjective" goals of individuals. In addition, theories have been proposed that seek to explain causally the positing of goals, and thus to unmask them as ideological. The aim of this line of thought is to reduce the orientations of the individual agent to his economic interests or his "objective situation," and to explain law in a given society as a product of ideology.

However, no essential progress is made by causal explanations of this sort. Even if particular causal dependencies can be established, with some degree of plausibility, between ideas and their material situation, the form of these dependencies (i.e., the statement of an invariant relation between particular causes and particular effects) is much too simple to do justice to the very complicated structure of modern societies. The critique and unmasking of someone's naïve faith in his own goals does not suffice, when it consists only in uncovering latent causes: a simplified idea of one's plans and their justification is indispensable for all action. Its naïveté—that is, its capacity to obscure other possibilities—provides an equally indispensable defense for the motives of action. The reason for this lies in man's limited capacity for processing information, in his limited potential for grasping and reducing complex situations.[1] Once we accept this, we shall no longer be tempted to base legal and social theory upon a concept of action, for this concept offers only meager resources for handling complexity. Instead, a theoretical framework must be sought which will allow us to overcome the experiential limits of the individual agent and to grasp a higher degree of complexity. The modern theory of social systems seems to have been moving in this direction.

By employing ideas worked out in the general theory of systems and in cybernetics,[2] we can define social configurations as systems that, in an inordinately complex environment, hold constant a less complex network of expectations and that are thereby able to orient action. Because of the way actions are meaningfully related to one another and reinforce one another's selectivity, systems can be maintained as frameworks for orienting action, even though their own complexity is less than that of the environment. In social sys-

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tems thus defined, positive law and ideology acquire the function of reducing the complexity of the system and its environment. They form a system-structure complex enough to enable the system to survive in its environment. At the same time they make possible a meaningful orientation of experience and action along the lines laid down by the structure.

We have now established an analytical perspective within which positive law and ideology may be compared. But we have still said nothing about the relation between them. We shall go on to assume that this relation hinges on their both being problem-solving institutions, but we have yet to settle how these institutions function and what systems they require and develop. These last questions must be answered first. We must clarify the functions and modes of functioning that belong to positive law and ideology, as well as the preconditions for these mechanisms, before we can decide what relations obtain between them.

II. Positive Law

It is probably no accident that at the same time as the concept of value began its philosophical career, the suspicion of ideology arose to become nearly universal *and* (for the first time in history) law became positive, or in other words was handed over to the decisions of the political system. The simultaneity of these events suggests the hypothesis that connections may be found between ideology and law, or more exactly, between the ideologization of what today are called "values" and the positivization of law.

Such a connection cannot consist in any thorough-going identity in their content, for this would imply a fusion of law and ideology. One need only select a legal document at random and try to tease out of it, paragraph by paragraph, its ideological content. The difficulties encountered would make the difference between law and ideology painfully obvious. What is common to both law and ideology must be sought at a much more abstract level. It lies not in their content, but in their form. Positive law and ideology resemble each other in that each naturally implies a characteristic distance toward itself. This formal equivalence or structural analogy must

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now be worked out in detail. Only in this way can we hope to understand why both arose, and arose at the same time. For it may well be precisely this self-distance that was needed in society and was thus created.

Positive law is made valid by decisions: a law of any content whatsoever can gain legitimate legal validity; and the same decision that makes the law a valid one can also withdraw its validity. At first sight this seems a rather implausible postulate—not only for jurists, but most of all for sociologists.[3] Nonetheless, it has become so much a reality that it dominates and characterizes our law.

For this reason, it is extremely interesting to ask how in general positive law is possible and under what preconditions a society can run the risk of making its law positive. For us, the foundation of law can no longer be located in a supreme natural law that exists objectively and through its objective truth is permanently binding. The stability and validity of the law no longer rests upon a higher and more stable order, but instead upon a principle of variation: it is the very alterability of law that is the foundation for its stability and its validity.

Accordingly, we cannot properly grasp the nature of positive law, if we continue to conceive of it as the lowest rung in a hierarchy of legal sources and materials, as what is left over now that the higher levels have fallen away. The concept of legal positivity must instead be based on a theory of the decision-processes involved.

When we analyze the decision-process underlying positive law, it is at first surprising to note that to a significant extent decisions are made not only about actions, but also about decisions themselves. Obviously it is not possible to take account of all necessary considerations within a single decision, however difficult or protracted. Decision-making procedures get divided up into a number of decisions, some of which provide premises for the others. Decision-making is distributed through a division of labor. That makes sense, of course, only if the burdens of decision-making are also distributed, so that each decision does not require a reprise of the previous considerations. Thus, for example, in enacting a law all the situations in which it is to be applied do not have to be foreseen and thought through, and likewise in the interpretation of a law all

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the alternatives considered while the law was being passed do not have to be reviewed once again.[4]

Cooperative decision-making is always advantageous, or even necessary, when decisions must be made in highly complex environments. This is so for a variety of reasons: when a choice must be made from among a great many possibilities, when the necessary conditions for consensus among a large number of persons are unclear, when long-term decisions must be made without examining all relevant factors and without excluding possible changes that may become necessary, or when material, social, and temporal complexity all come together. Such environments demand that the decision-making process have a complex organization, just as only systems with such an organization are in the position to have a very complex environment and to survive in it.[5]

To master a high degree of internal complexity, the effectiveness of social processes must be strengthened by having them applied to themselves or to processes of a similar kind. For example, such a system must be able to define concepts (thus to speak about words), to use money (thus to exchange possibilities for exchange), to learn how to teach or to learn itself, to overpower the holders of power, to do research into the nature of research and, as already mentioned, to make decisions about decisions. Processes that are applied to themselves and whose effectiveness is thereby reinforced can be characterized, by virtue of this common structural feature, as reflexive mechanisms (Luhmann, 1966a). Making decisions about decisions, in other words, is only a case of applying a much more universal structural principle. And within the framework of this reflexive sort of decision-making we meet an even more restricted case of application in the normative regulation of the formation of norms. It is this last form of self-reflexivity that makes possible the positivization of law.

In social orders with positive law there must be a layer of norms addressed to the decision-making organizations and that regulate the process of formulating norms. (They cannot, however, either shape or justify the content of the norms produced.) These are, for example, procedural norms or norms stipulating the minimal conditions under which an emerging legal idea can become a norm.

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Even these procedural norms for formulating norms can and must become part of positive law. Once the principle of variability begins to dominate the legal order and the structures of the affiliated roles, a guarantee for the validity of law can no longer be found in norms having an unalterable traditional or natural validity.[6] The structuring function of norms for formulating norms demands only that these procedural norms be treated as constants in the course of the procedures that they regulate—even if at another time they could be replaced or altered.

Under these circumstances the stability of a social order secured by law must be ensured, above all, by political processes. Stability becomes a permanent problem. Therefore, politics can no longer be conducted haphazardly, by amateurs, or on the basis of a heterogeneous status-system (e.g., familial, religious, or economic). It must be organized through political parties as a form of professional work. Whenever the decision-programs of a state bureaucracy as well as the conditions for political support are institutionalized as variable in principle, their coordination becomes a problem that can no longer be solved solely through institutional guarantees. Instead, it remains a continual task that requires a very special institutional order.[7]

An additional stabilizing factor can be found in the discrepancy between the complexity of the whole legal code and the scope of individual decision-making processes. Complex legal orders exclude the possibility that everything can be altered at once.[8] Every meaningful change in the law must take existing law into account. Every innovator, so long as he does not turn as a revolutionary against the whole order, must set aside time to learn about the legal system. And these learning periods are periods of socialization, in which the existing order is by and large accepted.

As a third stabilizing factor we should mention the fact that subjective rights (or at least a monetary compensation for their violation) are guaranteed. This is what makes the rapid fluctuation in legislation tolerable in the first place. The independence of this guaranteed protection of rights from the mode in which law is grounded (subjective rights remain valid in both natural right and positivistic legal systems) belongs among the decisive achieve-

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ments of modern legal thought. Without it, a full positivization of law would not have been possible.[9]

Nonetheless, despite all this, the continuity of particular values in a stable legal and social order is not guaranteed. Here we come upon the problem of ideology that must be clarified before we can pose more fundamental questions about the character and the conditions for stability of a social order employing reflexive mechanisms.

III. Ideology

Whereas the positivization of law is made possible by a normative regulation of norms, the function of ideology has to do with an evaluation of values. A value can be defined very generally as any point of view specifying which consequences of action are to be preferred to others. Values become ideological once this selective function in the orientation of action becomes conscious and is used in turn to evaluate values.[10] Values are then evaluated according to what specific action they select, and in this function they themselves appear to be substitutable (Luhmann, 1962; Friedrich, 1963). As soon as we have understood this function of values, it becomes a standard for evaluating values themselves. "Absolute" values are now conceivable only as values without a function. Thus they discredit themselves.

Just as in legal theory we must free ourselves from the prejudice that the permanent is better than what is subject to change and that natural law is better than positive law, so in value-theory we must free ourselves from the prejudice that permanent values are more valuable than those which can be cited only as a temporary basis for action. The former are supposed to take precedence in cases of conflict. But why? An evaluation of values according to an intrinsic and stable hierarchy of values is impossible (Braybrooke and Lindblom, 1963). Who can claim, unconditionally and universally, that culture is a greater value than hygiene, or freedom a greater value than peace? If an ordering of values is going to cross the lowest threshold of minimal complexity, it must become opportunistic. It must foresee the possibility of varying the order of values according

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to what actions are possible or urgent and according to how much the various values have been realized. The function of ideology is to make these variations possible. This function corresponds to the normative regulation of norms in the legal domain. It is structurally analogous and necessary for similar reasons.

On a closer inspection, it becomes clear that at least two things are required. An ideology must be able, first of all, to direct the choice of value-programs and the corresponding sacrifices and renunciations as well as to regulate the substitution of these programs. To this extent ideology has a pragmatic or instrumental function. In addition it must secure the consensus of those who will have to wait with their own values. An ideology must provide them with the certainty that they, too, will get their turn. To this extent ideology has a symbolic or expressive function.[11] In complex systems that can satisfy many values (although not all at the same time) these two functions tend to diverge.[12] They must then be reintegrated through the symbolic structure of an ideology, so that the long-term and roundabout realization of values can be both regulated and legitimated on this basis. Ideology differs from rationally developed decision-programs in that it seeks to orchestrate the distribution and redistribution of benefits and burdens by appeal to a symbolic system that is both strongly expressive and open to consensus. This is how it tries to evaluate values. In other words, ideologies are to be understood as symbolic structures that allow the formulation of values to become reflexive and thus increase the scope and the complexity of this aspect of the decision-making process. These symbolic structures must, therefore, allow room for change both in values and in actions, and indeed each must be changeable in relation to the other. This reflexivity is most clearly established in Marxist ideology with the principles of dialectic and the unity of theory and practice.[13] On the other hand, the dangers of unlimited complexity implicit in all mutually variable relations, must be mastered; into an ideology must be incorporated symbols, which are themselves immune to the change of values and which can channel and legitimate such change, without impairing it. Such a foundation, itself not subject to evaluation and so not needing to be reevaluated, can be found in a materialistic philosophy. Not by chance is this ideology par excellence a combination of dialectic

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and materialism. Furthermore, the open-endedness and variability of Marxism as an ideology is ensured through the collateral legitimation of an organization, the party, whose job is to continually reinterpret the ideology.[14]

This best known of all ideologies is not the only one in which the problem of the reflexivity of evaluation can be solved. When we submit a problem to functional analysis, we usually come upon other possible, functionally equivalent solutions. A very successful alternative ideology has been developed by many multiparty systems. They have turned upside down the reigning value conceptions by reversing political ends and means. It is generally believed that political activity should strive for goals with a definite content. Power, in the form of the competency to make decisions, is given to politicians so that they can realize these goals. The goal of political parties by contrast is to acquire and to hold onto this power, so the content of political programs is chosen in order to bring the party nearer to this goal. The political program is thus viewed as a means subordinate to this end (Downs 1957). This "perversion" makes all values variable and evaluation itself reflexive. It fixes a standpoint from which all values can be understood functionally, that is, from which they can be instrumentalized.

Here, too, the chief problem for such a political order lies in the dangers of an unlimited complexity that (in the end) allows everything to appear possible. These dangers can be circumvented by keeping particular symbols, norms, and institutions politically neutral and aloof from the struggle among political parties; examples would be the organizational foundations of state power, the decision-making activity of the courts, and (of increasing importance) the central banks. An important condition for maintaining the reflexivity of evaluation is that these neutralizations remain formal and do not hinder opportunism in the political readjustment of values. Another surety against the range of possible decisions' becoming completely arbitrary lies in elections. Political parties must adapt, not of course their political calculations, but rather the public presentation of their goals to the presumed will of the electorate. Because they do not know what the will of the electorate is and cannot even shape it ideologically, they interpret it on the basis of the lowest common denominator—materialistically. Thus, a polit-

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ical materialism fulfills here a function similar to that of the ideological materialism of socialist systems.

The crucial differences between these two very roughly sketched political orders are of interest in this context only as means of showing how they both institutionalize the political formulation of values as a reflexive process. What seems open to choice is only how this reflexivity is established, and not whether it is established. There must be profound reasons for this fact. To discover them would enable us to clarify why law had to be positivized, that is—why it had to become reflexive.

IV. Reflexivity

The success of a process is enhanced when it is applied to itself, or to processes of a similar kind, before it fulfills its proper function.[15] Social processes capable of becoming reflexive in this way are always based on a selective manipulation of information, and the success of this selection can be increased once the selective mechanism is itself preselected through a second mechanism of the same kind.[16] Along with this increase in selectivity is an increase in the complexity of the situations that a mechanism can handle—precisely because it distributes the reduction of this complexity into two or more sequential stages. Everyone realizes that the number of possible consumer choices is enormously increased through the mechanism of money (the possibility of exchanging possibilities of further exchange). It is equally clear that more decisions can be made when we can decide in advance what decisions will be permissible. Even the power of a system increases when the system can apply power to power, or make the power of some utilizable for the power of others. We can observe this same phenomenon of enhancement in the mechanisms that interest us here: positive law and ideology.

Traditional legal orders, including those based on the idea of natural law, were only able to legitimate decisions that could be represented as an unfolding of previously existing law. It is well known that a demand for this sort of traditionalist foundation does not rule out innovations in the body of law; new law can, for ex-

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ample, be instituted as the restoration of the good old law. But it is equally certain that such traditionalism severely limited the range of possible legal decisions, and thus too the range of possible domains covered by the law. The immense extension of the competence of the law in the nineteenth century could have been attained only through the positivization of law. This development made it possible to bring rapidly fluctuating situations and behavior within the scope of the law. The significance of positive law does not, therefore, lie only in the temporal dimension, in the possibility of replacing old law by new law; instead this very possibility leads to a further restructuring of the content of law. These are, in fact, two different aspects of the same development—an increase in the complexity of the law.

We find the same function in the way the formulation of values has become reflexive: it increases the range of values that can be taken into account in decision-making. The more the elementary needs of life are allayed and the more differentiated society becomes, the more values can and must be satisfied. But then the multiplicity of possible values can only be mastered opportunistically. However, such opportunism should not become an excuse for arbitrariness. It presupposes a conceptual and organizational mechanism for ensuring, among the numerous changes in orientations and preferences, an adequate consideration of *all* values and, to that extent, a minimum of consistency. At the same time, such a mechanism must secure the consensus of those who will have to wait for the realization of their values.

These considerations suggest that the reason for the positivization of law and the rise of ideologies lies in one and the same situation: in an increase in the range of possible actions among which choices can be made, and thus in a heightening of the complexity of society—a heightening that, in turn, is attainable only when more effective mechanisms for the reduction of complexity can be institutionalized. A larger range of possible actions means that a social system has a greater chance for survival, *if* this range of possible actions can be made accessible in an orderly fashion—i.e., if the complexity of the system does not exceed its capacity for processing information. In order to ensure this, numerous social mechanisms must become reflexive.

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This thesis is closely related to those theories of social evolution which construe the increasing functional-structural differentiation of society as a key variable for the progress of civilization.[17] But system-differentiation is not, as such, the ultimate, or even a sufficient, explanation. It serves only to increase the range of possible actions in society and, in spite of this higher complexity, to make meaningful action possible. It is a necessary mechanism, but not the sole mechanism that brings this about. The equation between complexity and system-differentiation[18] defines the problem of complexity by referring to a particular way of solving it. This could block inquiry into functionally equivalent mechanisms for the heightening and reduction of complexity. It would be an unfortunate loss for our topic in particular. Reflexive mechanisms, in fact, are just such a functional equivalent. Together with and parallel to social differentiation they fulfill the identical function of heightening the complexity of the social order and, in spite of the inborn narrowness of human perspectives on experience and action, of making meaningful orientation possible.

V. Conditions for Stability

In many cases (e.g., power, money, norms, and values), when a social mechanism becomes reflexive, it leads not only to a heightening of efficiency but also to an increase in risk. That is why the development we have been tracing has usually been accompanied by a concern for the risks involved. Both the positivization of law and the spreading suspicion of ideology were initially perceived as highly dangerous. Indeed, this was the predominant reaction to the problem. Typically evasive responses were the appeal to mysteriously preexistent legal principles (as a flight from the blatant positivity of law) and to nihilism or the renunciation of all values (as an escape from the revisability of values). The underlying worry is comprehensible: how can we trust a corpus of law that can be altered from one day to another, or an order of values that demands a continual reordering of relative preferences?

Nonetheless, once we have recognized that reflexive mechanisms are indispensable for maintaining the present level of social com-

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plexity, it becomes questionable whether the particular risks involved can be mastered through recourse to such prereflexive conceptions of order as natural law or eternal values. Indeed, how can conceptions of a lower and rather indeterminate complexity regulate ones of a higher and determinate complexity? In view of the wide range of actual values and norms now involved in practical decision-making, it is increasingly questionable whether principles and ultimate perspectives that can be withdrawn from all variation and relativity will indeed provide an apt instrument for stabilization and control. The expectation that the standard for movement, which itself guarantees movement, is to be found in what is fixed or unmoved becomes itself an ideology.

It is much more important to analyze thoroughly the ways reflexive mechanisms can function and can be stabilized, and thus to locate the risks and problematic consequences that are connected to them. In this way, remedies become visible, or at least a quite acute sensitivity to the problem can be cultivated. We shall then recognize that the dangers in positive law are no longer resolvable in strictly legal terms and that the dangers associated with the relativity of values cannot be absorbed by means of overarching values. For the root of the problem lies precisely in the application of a mechanism to itself. Thus, the question must become one for sociology, which must be capable of determining under what general conditions societies are able to institutionalize reflexive mechanisms.

At the present time, such a question would overtax sociology. Nonetheless, various facets of this issue have been discussed—for example, the problem of how the reflexivity of experience, or subjective self-consciousness, can be institutionally accommodated.[19] The preference accorded this topic stems from the traditional prejudice that thought is the only process that can be applied to itself. Only if the concept of self-reflection is broadened, as it has been here, can we decide in what theoretical framework to pursue answers to our questions.

We can assume that only social systems having a rather high complexity of their own can transform social processes into reflexive mechanisms and stabilize them so that other processes can rely upon them. A high complexity presupposes, for its part, functional-

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structural differentiation. A considerable differentiation between functionally specific subsystems in a society—for example, between systems having to do with production and exchange, with religion, with culture and education, with politics, with leisure and entertainment, with the use of force, with health-care, etc.—and the solution of the problems resulting from such a social order, seem to underlie the need for reflexive mechanisms and for their institutionalization. The different reflexive mechanisms presuppose, however, different levels of system-complexity and thus can arise sequentially. A conceptually articulate language is possible before the study of education, money is possible before ideology, bureaucratic decisions about decision-making are possible before positive law, and these last two both presuppose, to some extent, the existence of reflexive mechanisms. Even the reflexive interiorization of subjective experience, so that belief becomes an object of belief, knowledge an object of certainty, and the sentiments an object of feeling, presupposes a certain level of complexity in the social order, for example freedom from fear and need by virtue of reflexively centralized power and money (Elias 1939). Such a sequence of stages is itself an essential precondition for development. If every mechanism presupposed the existence of every other as well as an extremely differentiated society, such a society could never arise. No transitional stages could be stabilized; instead, development could take place only in one impossible leap from a simple to a complex system.[20]

Considerations of this sort have to be pursued, in order to provide an overview of the general social preconditions for the stabilization of positive law and ideology. But this alone is not sufficient. It is also necessary that the subsystem of society that supports and administers both of these mechanisms, namely the political system, be organized around reflexivity.[21]

When a political system admits a high degree of variability in the premises of its decisions, the demands and risks then increase with respect to both of its essential functions—the building of political support and the preparation of binding decisions. Social mechanisms that serve the construction of power positions, the testing and confirming of leadership talent, and the procuring of consensus, as well as processes for readying, issuing, and controlling binding

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decisions have to be oriented toward variable premises. Connected with this is a profound restructuring of the political domain as well as important changes in the bureaucratic activities of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government. It is not by chance that these changes in the traditional hierarchical structure of the political system have been introduced at the same time as the spread of suspicions about ideology. They are all closely linked to the fact that the political system now claims full authority over positive law.

Because political support now depends on *variable* decision-programs, it can no longer be institutionally guaranteed; traditional or religious forms of legitimate domination can no longer be presupposed. Political support must be continually cultivated, and this work must be organized and its institutional framework secured. This is why political parties arise. On the other hand bureaucratic administration, in the broadest sense (encompassing all powers of the state), must be specialized and rationalized for the carrying out of politically chosen programs. These two demands force a functional and structural separation between politics and administration, since maximal performance can be attained in both areas only through building systems and functionally specific organizations. Such a separation can be quite clearly observed in all multiparty systems: not only roles, but also goals and behavioral expectations are separated in this way, and even the style and criteria of rationality differ in politics and in administration. Indeed, even one-party systems of an ideological stripe, which emphasize the unity of the social order and thus place limits upon differentiation, do not return to the old type of unified social hierarchy. Instead, they consciously separate the party from the state apparatus. Only in developing countries is this separation of roles within the political system feebly developed. A shifting back and forth between political and administrative functions among politicians, the administration, and the army is an everyday occurrence. The diffuseness of this internal differentiation means that such reflexive mechanisms as law and ideology are fragile achievements and fall apart quickly in practice.

We cannot here enter further into the particular problems resulting from this separation between politics and administration.[22] It must be emphasized, however, that both new forms for mobiliz-

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ing political support and the variable programming of decision-making must be accommodated by a functional differentiation within the political system. Functional differentiation increases the complexity of the political system. Complexity requires the differentiation of a system from its social milieu and a relative autonomy in the way it governs itself and alters the premises of its own decisions. This leads to a reflexivity of the decision-process and of the processes of formulating norms and values that flow into it. This reflexivity, in turn, requires and reinforces the functional differentiation of the political system. Ultimately, the preconditions for stabilizing positive law and ideology must be located in this circle of interdependence, which lifts the social order (and the political system with it) to a higher level of complexity.

VI. Values and Programs

Whenever law and ideology confront one another in a conceptual vacuum, they inevitably fall to fighting. A battle ensues about which is causally or normatively prior. Moreover, there is then no theoretical framework in which this argument can be settled or simply allayed. In order to avoid the stagnation of such a conflict, we have abandoned this narrow view of the topic and instead traced law and ideology back to what they share in common—their status as reflexive mechanisms. This does not absolve us, however, from the problem of describing more closely the relation between law and ideology.

Here there arises a new difficulty. Within the framework of traditional theories of action it is not easy to draw a sharp distinction between values and norms or between values and goals. The ethical tradition could content itself with a simple distinction between the concrete agent and the normative essence of his action, since its ultimate concern lay with fostering right actions. Within the sphere of the "ought," it could utilize concepts like essence, telos, goal, norm, duty, and goodness in order to designate the standpoints governing action. Although philosophical traditions (and the concepts and theories of action they used) might differ from one another, the working out of a nuanced categorical description of action

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remained unnecessary. Fundamentally, it was always a matter of fixing the correct aims of action as invariant with respect to the vicissitudes of actual behavior, and of justifying this invariance.

If we transpose this discussion into the conceptual framework of systems theory (and otherwise we can understand neither the function of reflexive mechanisms nor the function of functional differentiation), we cannot retain this simple division of the subject-matter. Systems theories are not concerned with encouraging right actions, but rather with the meaning-based system-building connections among actions; these connections are in no way exhausted by the intended and conscious meaning of the actions involved. Such a theory must distinguish more carefully the variety of meaning-based relations among actions than was previously necessary for theories of action.

One such distinction is of especial importance for our problem of demarcating law from ideology.[23] It has to do with the different levels at which the content of a set of actions can be generalized. We can roughly distinguish four levels of generalization, depending on whether the meaningful interconnections among different[24] actions are established by reference to a person, a role, an action-program (norms or goals) or a value.[25] A concrete person serves for all who know him as a guarantee of the consistency of a specific set of actions and thus makes it possible to formulate accurate expectations about future behavior. The same is true, on a more abstract level, for roles, and on an even higher level for norms or goals, which dictate only a very few actions. Finally comes the level of values which lump together a wide (and indiscriminate) range of actions as choiceworthy. Every social system probably has to utilize all these levels for the generalization of meaning in order to integrate actions. But the precision with which the individual levels are distinguished varies from system to system and increases with the complexity of the system (Parsons 1966a, p. 11). Only in very complex systems can we count on roles being separated from persons and values from norms and goals. When this occurs, however, a four-part schema must replace the two-part schema that sufficed for ethical theory.

The underlying reason for this development is that a high degree of social complexity can be symbolized neither through concrete

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personal patterns of expectations nor through merely evaluative ones. Instead, it must be anchored at the intermediate level of roles and programs. Persons are too concrete, while values are too abstract. Thus, it turns out that as the complexity of the social order increases, roles and programs begin to support structural differentiation. The lowest and highest levels of meaning must then be functionally varied vis-à-vis this intermediate level. Persons must be mobilized and values must be ideologized.[26] It then becomes necessary to distinguish clearly between roles and persons as well as between values and programs of action.

While the relation between roles and persons has been the subject of a vigorous discussion in contemporary sociology—although not from this particular theoretical perspective (Dahrendorf 1964; Plessner 1960; Tenbruck 1961; Claessens 1963)—the more abstract yet parallel problem, the distinction between programs of action and values, has remained neglected. Consequently, crucial preliminary work is lacking for an analysis of the relation between law and ideology.

Values (for example, life, hygiene, freedom, social responsibility, wealth, salvation) are symbols for the preference accorded to actions that, thus far, remain indeterminate. At this level of abstraction they can all be affirmed without hesitation; they thus serve as synthetic and integrating formulae for evoking social consensus. On the other hand, when it comes to planning particular actions or programs of action, conflicts between values must be resolved; and at this level of abstraction there are no universally valid rules for such a purpose. We cannot give an eternal ranking to all the values cited above.[27] Only the values themselves, and not any fixed relations among them, can be generalized.

Since all action, if it is thought through carefully and its consequences seen far enough ahead, is caught up in conflicting values, our analysis yields an unavoidable conclusion: no action can be justified by an ordering of values. In other words, decisions about actions have, with regard to any order of values whatsoever, an irreducibly independent significance. Only a foreshortened view of the consequences can obscure this fact. Wundt's well-known concept of the "heterogony of goals" is another name for the same idea.

Looked at inversely, this means that concrete action cannot uni-

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vocally support, stabilize, and symbolize any fixed ranking of values.[28] Instead, there must be an ambivalent relation between them. Similarly between values and programs of action there can be no rigid relations which order them invariantly with respect to one another (this, too, compels us to distinguish the two levels). In a highly complex situation, an ordering of values can no longer be translated into (and anchored by) an unalterable program of action. The inverse strategy forces itself upon us. When the alterability of programs of action becomes a principle, it is evident that neglected values have only been shelved temporarily and for the particular case at hand, while their inherent validity is not in dispute. They are not repudiated as values, nor their advocates and adherents disqualified as persons. They can be held in abeyance and brought forward all the more convincingly at the next opportunity. After being repeatedly passed over, they are stored up with all the more urgency. When values and programs are successfully separated in this way, the *variability of programs* can even serve to ensure the *stability of values*. The "enduring" can be grounded on the "changing"—an inconceivable idea for the ontological tradition. Value conflicts are allayed, and only temporary priorities have to be established (Friedrich 1963, p. 335f.). We can be tolerant toward adherents of other values and ask of them only patience.[29] To this extent, the positivization of law gives indirect support to the integrative function of ideological value orderings.

Stabilization through variability naturally does not mean that in practice values possess no significance for action; it means only that this significance cannot be deduced from the values, but must be filtered through intermediate achievements of an innovative sort. Here we find a reference point for grasping more clearly the function of ideology and the function of law and for demarcating one from the other. Ideology fills such an intermediate role by making possible an evaluation of values and thus an opportunistic treatment of them. Law accomplishes something similar by programming action. The discrepancy between abstract values and concrete actions is narrowed to a distinction between ideology and law, and over this smaller gap bridges can be built.

For this purpose it is essential that ideology not be set up, as a pure order of values or law, as a concrete prescription for action. Ideologies are not only constellations of values, but at the same

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time world-views, interpretations of history, interpretations of facts, as well as confirmations and distributions of competencies and duties. They must assimilate values and at the same time provide a basis for the evaluation and opportunistic treatment of these values. The possibility is thereby created of selecting values that can be taken over into a program of action, and neutralizing other values (hence, setting them aside temporarily while a specific program is being pursued).

Nonetheless, establishing programs for action remains a decision in its own right. The rather indeterminate complexity of what can be defended ideologically must be transformed into pointers for action, whose determinacy must satisfy strict requirements, especially when they are to become law backed up by sanctions. One cannot formulate legal regulations by direct appeal to Marx and Lenin. The more stringent the requirements become for consistency between ideology and decision-programs, the more need there is for intensive communication. Therefore, in many states the interpreters of the ideology must apprise the administrative apparatus (responsible for formulating and executing decision-programs) of which interpretations of certain situations are acceptable, which account of past history is still utilizable, how the priorities look at the moment, and who must be regarded as a renegade.

The vast range of possible conflicts among the profusion of accepted values is of constant concern in establishing programs for action. For decisions to be possible, a limited selection of relevant values must be made, and this selection must secure a certain amount of consistency with other decisions. The problem of value conflicts is brought nearer to a solution by a process of selecting values that are pertinent to the particular program at hand and that satisfy certain minimal conditions of consistency. Now there are two different forms for planning programs as well as for ensuring consistency. We must pursue this point further, since the way law depends upon ideology varies according to which form is chosen.

VII. Goal Programs and Conditional Programs

We must think of social systems as action contexts that are linked to their environment by causal connections, but that are not directly

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determined by that environment. Accordingly, a cause in the environment that affects a system does not immediately prompt a particular response to it by the system. Instead, the system has time to set into motion internal processes for selecting and manipulating information. In this way a system can combine various causal factors and thereby collaborate in determining the nature of its own response. The pattern involved in this selective processing of information is what we shall call a "program."

According to the "input/output model," by which this sort of open and relatively autonomous system is usually represented (Parsons and Smelser 1956; Parsons 1960a, pp. 17, 59f.; Herbst 1962, p. 141f.; Easton 1965b; Almond 1965), such a program has available only two points of approach. Programming can begin either with the output or with the input. *Either* a desired response can be taken as invariant and used as a rule for selecting causes that can bring it about (then the response becomes a goal, and the program is a goal program); *or* the program holds constant a particular cause which, whenever it occurs, must trigger a particular type of action. In this case we have a conditional program. These two fundamental types of program are jointly exhaustive (Luhmann 1964a; 1966a; Eckhoff and Jacobsen 1960). But they can be combined in numerous ways and embedded in each other, so that it is often difficult to assign concrete programs to the one type or to the other.

Each type of program has its own relation to ideology and to law. Goal programs are better justified ideologically, while conditional programs are more suited to the legal system. By combining both types of program, law and ideology can be married, just as, on the other hand, political systems which opt basically for one or the other type of program thereby take on either a primarily ideological or a primarily legal orientation in problem-solving.

Ideologies are closely allied to goal programs because values typically refer to the effects (or goals) that actions try to achieve, and not (although this is possible) to particular causes or to the action itself. At any rate, in the age of ideologies, ascribing values to causes or to actions as such, irrespective of their effects (for example, as rituals, convictions, or pure activity) seems the exception. Values have to be understood more abstractly, so that a number of possible actions can be left open. That can only come about when actions are selected according to the (positively valued) effects they

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produce, when these effects can be achieved in different ways, and when they can then serve to select the proper means to attain them. As a result, ideologies usually get translated into action by means of goal-programs that specify what goals under what circumstances can guide and justify the choice of means.

On the other hand, the means/end schema poses considerable difficulties for jurists who are faced with increasing demands for the security of law and for the calculability of decisions. This is so precisely because of the openness of the schema described above.[30] The inference from the end to the means—in the sense of the old maxim that a right to the end entails a right to the means has lost its importance for law.[31] As programs, goals lose their preeminent status as the linchpin of the legal system. That is why, when legal regulations are at issue, conditional programs are preferred. They connect specific (or specifiable) legal consequences with clearly defined states of affairs; whenever such states of affairs are known to exist, correlated actions or decisions are set into motion (Luhmann 1966a, p. 38f.). This preference for conditional programs cannot be regarded as an essential feature of law *per se*. Traditional European natural law, for example, was based on a teleological conception of action. However, to the extent that law is made positive and delegated to the decision-processes of enormous bureaucracies, conditional programming stands out as a planning technique that can bind action in two ways: by a relatively centralized and precise determination of "if/then" correlations and by a delegation of responsibility whereby whoever can show that the "if"-clause is true can activate what the "then"-clause prescribes.[32]

Depending on whether a political system resorts chiefly to goal programs or to conditional programs, the techniques vary with which (at the level of programs) the bureaucracy making decisions pursues and checks consistency in its decisions. Indeed, even the concept of consistency, the style of rationality, the kind of mistakes that can be made, and the excuses that are available all depend upon the type of program. Goal programs are rationalized in the following way. Through taking secondary conditions into account and through efforts to economize, the greatest possible care can be taken and expenses can be kept to a minimum so that a maximum number of goals can be pursued simultaneously. Rationalization

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thus reduces the extent to which value conflicts will occur. The indispensable precondition for this sort of calculation is the mechanism of money (once again a reflexive mechanism). In contrast, conditional programs are tested for consistency by means of the construction of legal concepts and by efforts to provide fundamental justifications for particular verdicts. This takes place above all in the decision-making processes that apply the law, in a continuing effort to make a symbolic presentation of the law. Here the consequences for decision-making of specific definitions, distinctions, interpretations, and arguments are considered. And here, too, it is clarified what future possibilities of decision-making are opened up or blocked by a particular ruling.[33]

VIII. Ideologically Integrated States and Constitutional States

We have already emphasized that neither type of program ever appears in a "pure" form. Both offer such eminent advantages in reducing a high level of complexity that no complex political system can renounce either of them. Nonetheless, political systems often give a pivotal role to one type or the other. Thus, we must ask what the reasons are for emphasizing one or the other and what political and social structures are connected with such a choice.

General systems-theoretical considerations suggest that we should begin the analysis with the problem of the complexity the political system is meant to reduce. If it is correct that the complexity of a system must correspond to the complexity of its environment (see note 5), we can imagine that with the increasing complexity of a society the complexity of its political system increases too, and that too slight a problem-solving capacity in the political system stymies the development of society to a higher level of complexity and differentiation. Rising demands on the political system and on the capacity of its political and administrative decision-making processes require that the political system be differentiated from the rest of society, that its roles and decision-programs be separated from those of other social domains (e.g., the economy, religion, culture, the family) and their moral codes. The separation of law

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and morality is a typical consequence of this development of civilization. In the same process of differentiation, the political system attains an autonomy in deciding about the premises of its own decision-making which is necessary for dealing with a higher level of complexity. The complexity of a system and its environment, the internal functional and structural differentiation of a system and its differentiation from the rest of society, the relative autonomy of a system in relation to its environment—these are different variables that only can increase together.

It is obvious that with increasing complexity the need increases for structures and processes that reduce complexity, and thus for reflexive mechanisms. Accordingly, our problem can be made more precise by means of the following questions. What are the effects upon the heightening and reduction of complexity when a political system tries to achieve reflexivity at the level of society's overarching values (i.e., through ideology)? What consequences follow when a society orients its law toward planning and the attainment of goals? Or, on the other hand, what happens when a society relies instead upon positive law and utilizes ideologies only in order to sanctify the conditions underlying the process of positivization and to shelter them from political struggles? These alternatives seem to capture some of the differences that today separate the industrial states of the world into an East block and a West block.

Societies to be integrated politically through an ideology are typically planned with a concern for the "output" of specific, politically desirable effects. For example, planning takes place with an eye to the goals of power politics or today especially with an eye to the goals of economic development. Such societies favor goal programs. Goal programs can be meaningful and successful only if the input of the political system can be varied and selected in conformity with the desired results—that is, only if the political system is relatively free to determine what kinds of information will influence it. The social expectations, demands, and conditions of political support must then be regulated ideologically, as soon as they are loosened from the unchanging bonds of tradition through the process of civilization and freed for a greater mobility. "Public opinion" must be regulated in such a way that the dominance of ideological values and goals is not put into question and that there

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is only a technical and instrumental discussion about the best means by which to realize them.

Ideology claims to be binding for the whole society. This development leads to typical problems. As the complexity of society increases, so do the demands upon ideology as a schema for solving problems; in particular, there occurs an unsurveyable increase in the interdependencies among the individual components of an ideology, whose consistency must continue to be maintained. Changes, accommodations, and renovations in an ideology become markedly difficult, because every small step can have unforeseeable repercussions upon the premises appealed to.[34] The burdens upon the reflexive and opportunistic mechanisms anchored in ideology then become excessive. A party organization capable of making decisions can lighten this burden to a certain extent, but here, too, the organizational capacity for processing data has its limits. The usual ideologically polished formulae serve internally as a means for facilitating mutual comprehension, and externally as an organizational framework for perceiving and making selections in the environment (March and Simon 1958, p. 164f.). The political sensitivity of these formulae is itself a problem. Of course, a limited political pluralism can be tolerated or even planned, in order to bring more exploitable complexity into the scope of the political system (Wiatr 1966). But within the framework of an ideology such pluralism cannot be so enlarged as to incorporate into the political system and submit to political arbitration radical structural conflicts between family life and economic development, religion and culture, personality and the need for governmental administration, or between the expected motives of agents and the methods of recruiting. In such states, political pluralism remains on a technical and instrumental level; the problem-solving capacity of the political system is built on the premise that, in the last analysis, all critical problems can be reduced to economic problems. For this reason (and because of the political ideologization of all public life) limits are set to the level of complexity such a society can reach.

In contrast, political systems that we can call constitutional multiparty democracies are oriented primarily toward "input." In the realm of party politics they leave open what expectations and demands will be expressed and how political support will be created,

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even if—here, too—the political issues of the day are expressed politically and proffered to the public in the form of value-symbols, possible demands, practical alternatives, and so forth. In the realm of bureaucracy conditional programs play an essential role. They lay down fixed conditions about how the administration performs and intervenes in the society. Thus, such programs allow the public to prompt or hinder bureaucratic decisions according to stable rules, without their suitability as a means for achieving specific goals becoming paramount. Thus, both for politics and for bureaucracy incoming information—in the form of articulated interests and demands or in the form of legal claims—has a major regulating function. Hence, such a political system is in danger of losing authority over what problems are posed and of thus surrendering the future to the "chance" of an unplanned social development, in favor of a past expressed in consolidated interests, investments, and legal claims.

Further dysfunctional consequences of this kind of social order arise with the problem of "input overburdening" (Easton 1965b, pp. 58f., 64f., 82f., 119f.). Since this kind of political system sets no limits to the complexity of society and there is no preselection of permissible political themes, it is overwhelmed with a plenitude of unharmonizable demands. Here the problem is not political sensitivity, but rather a political din.

This overburdening with many opposed and yet exactly articulated and consequential demands provides the decisive test for pluralistic or multiparty political systems that are unified not by ideology but only by specific rules for political competition and for recruitment into official positions. The conflictual structure of this party system makes it possible to absorb conflicts in the society at large. At the same time it cannot be expected that all the problems in this area can be solved politically before binding decision-programs are fixed—that is, before laws are established and goals are defined. The responsibility for a good many unanswered questions gets passed on in the form of vague or contradictory legislative programs to the authorities actually concerned with applying the law (Werner 1960). The law becomes inflated to an unimaginable level of complexity. Like ideology in an ideologically integrated system, here juristic techniques for solving problems become over-

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worked. Some of the consequences of this sort of pressure are the deluging of administrative bureaucracies with impracticable laws, the rediscovery and legitimation of judicial discretion, the increasingly abstruse taxonomy of legal subject-matter and of legal knowledge, the use of looseleaf collections and commentaries for special laws, and a noticeable lapse in conceptual style and the presentation of verdicts.

However, we should also attend to the advantages that accompany this shifting of responsibility onto the law. Politically insoluble problems are depoliticized while still being treated in another institutional context. Unquestionably, a large amount of power (that is, a reduction of complexity binding upon others) thus falls into the hands of legal authorities and the courts. But this power is institutionally too fragmented to be consolidated into political power. It cannot be exchanged and thus accumulated. It is always limited to groups involved in specific proceedings—and they are not able to form broad political coalitions. It can be used only for making decisions about individual questions, whose premises are always so exactly formulated that a thoroughgoing political ideology can no longer be developed from the operations of the legal system. The administration of a constitutional state has a compensatory (not adversary) relation to politics: it unburdens it. Political programming can thus limit itself to central governance, legislation, and budgeting.

The foregoing comparison between ideologically integrated political systems and constitutional multiparty democracies teaches us that the relation between law and ideology cannot be definitively examined at the level of abstraction where we began our investigation. Depending on whether positive law or ideology assumes the function of reducing the complexity of a political system, a different structure of society and different forms of problem-solving arise, as well as different problematic consequences and a different distribution of pressures and burdens. Such systems, in their full concreteness, as well as the relation between law and ideology in them, are therefore to some extent incommensurable.

Only at an extreme level of abstraction can we claim that (as reflexive mechanisms) law and ideology fulfill identical functions, and are therefore interchangeable or capable of easing each other's

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burdens. To the extent to which system-structures are constructed and institutionalized, particular forms of posing and solving problems become fixed and other mechanisms become adapted to the focal points of power, to the prevalent ways of reducing complexity, and to the kinds of problematic consequences that must be faced. For this reason, such a system loses its functional elasticity and can win it back only at considerable cost (Selznick, 1949, 1957). Actual systems cannot take advantage of the highest levels of functional abstraction. Sociological analysis, however, achieves its characteristic insights by virtue of laying out precisely those abstract viewpoints that remain inaccessible to concrete human action.

IX. Truth and Justice

Systems-theoretical analysis is a new idea. Traditionally, in Europe the ultimate standards have been sought in the criteria of truth and justice. Even today we are tempted to measure the concepts we have been discussing by these criteria, to examine ideologies for their truth and positive law for its justness. It belongs among the great, imperishable accomplishments of Western thought to contrast these concepts as critical standards with given beliefs and norms. It has become essential to ask whether the way something appears is the way it actually is, and whether, in a framework of traditional expectations, the way an action takes place is just. Yet, such questions ignore all established forms for reducing complexity and finally, in the form of universal skepticism, they lead to a discovery of the subjectivity of self-consciousness and of the contingency of the social world.

Originally, this critique of what exists was conceived as a guide to action in the undifferentiated sense by which traditional European thought contrasted the essential and the just with whatever is expedient. A trace of these efforts still lingers about contemporary attempts to understand truth and justice as values. However, the radicalization of this critique on the one hand and the increasing complexity of social reality on the other make it questionable whether such a critique is still a prescription for right thinking and right action. The century-long discussion about the concept of ide-

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ology and the concept of positive law, at least, has given no indication that this could be done. To insist upon truth as a value when confronted with ideology and to insist upon justice as a value when faced with positive law make little sense if it cannot be known what precisely should be preferred and if every attempt in this direction turns ideological. The old criteria have lost their critical and innovative function, not least of all because critique—as a reflexive method for formulating values and norms—has itself been institutionalized. They retain only symbolic functions: they serve to express good intentions, to appeal to good will, to express a presupposed consensus, and to postulate the possibility of mutual understanding.

In addition, the multitude of values and the impossibility of giving them a universally valid ordering make it impossible to express man's highest possibilities and his position in the world through value-concepts. What truth and justice once meant for man's self-understanding has been corrupted through their interpretation as values. For example, Aristotle believed justice was equidistant from all values, and thus was itself not a value at all; only so could it signify the highest good, human perfection. Given the increased complexity in thought and in reality, we find it difficult to attain once again the lofty level of Aristotle's conception of law. It is no longer possible to find a point for man's highest fulfillment that is equidistant from all values and is at the same time an ethical maxim for action. We have to think in a more differentiated manner. We have to separate the levels of values, norms, and goals from one another. Moreover, we have to give a dynamic quality to the idea of equidistance. On the basis of the conceptual alternatives available today, a theory of organized and reflexive decision-making processes that treat values opportunistically and view programs as capable of yielding decisions seems best able to satisfy these requirements.

If this assumption is correct, then we must realize that concepts such as opportunism, decision, positivity, ideology, and function—which measured by traditional lights are untenable, if not disreputable concepts—are precisely what can bring our thought back to the level and the systematicity of traditional European efforts to interpret political society and its legal system. This cannot be ac-

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complished, of course, by a transvaluation or positive valuation of these concepts. We can gain a proper basis for a dialogue with the tradition only when we understand the meaningful interconnection between these concepts and their functions. To this end, sociological systems theory, the basic principles of which are already developed, offers some hopeful prospects.

In view of the ever increasing complexity of our social order, we are compelled to revise the traditional models for interpreting and explaining human action. Their potential for handling complexity is too small—because they deduce means from ends, explain effects on the basis of causes, or try to fix invariant relations among particular factors. A theme such as the relation between law and ideology cannot be adequately addressed by means of such models. Ideologies as well as systems of positive law are highly complex symbolic structures. Moreover, they can become stable social institutions only when society itself attains a high degree of complexity. In the face of such a social order, idealistic concepts like truth and justice lose their instructive function and degenerate into ciphers for indeterminate and unspecifiable complexity. A high level of complexity, if it is not to remain unspecified, presupposes the construction of systems that not only recognize complexity by name, but also understand it and reduce it—that is, make it exploitable within the domain of action. This can take place through structures, subsystem-building, compartmentalization of meanings, reflexive mechanisms, communication nets, cybernetic regulations, and so forth. All of these allow action to be effectively oriented toward a multitude of alternative possibilities.

If we measure such systems with formal, idealistic criteria, we shall fail to recognize this problem of complexity. We shall then lapse into ineffective appeals, or fasten onto a particular interpretation of these criteria—for example, onto the concept of truth in logical positivism or the concept of justice in communism. This would entail a drastic reduction of complexity. In both cases our thought about complexity would remain altogether inferior to the level of complexity already present in action-systems. A meaningful critique of what exists is possible only as an immanent critique of systems—especially of the all-encompassing system of society it-

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self. Critique is possible only as the analysis of systems, as the re-exposing of problems that are solved by means of familiar norms, roles, institutions, processes, and symbols, and as the search for other, functionally equivalent possibilities. It is in this sense that we can speak of sociological enlightment (Luhmann 1967a).

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6

The Autonomy of the Legal System

I

The legal system consists of all social communication that is formulated with reference to law.[1] It is not confined to communication occurring within legally regulated procedures, but also includes that of daily life insofar as it raises legal questions or otherwise registers or repudiates legal claims. The legal system, in other words, is not exhausted by processes of "applying the law" in the narrow sense. The circumspection of lawyers, the negative orientation of those seeking to violate legal norms, precautions necessary to avoid being caught, preliminary probing into the feasibility of risky operations, decisions not to go to court, to proceed with a test case, or to renounce plans because of juridical difficulties—all this takes place *within* the legal system, to the extent that it is communicated about or that individuals anticipate communicating about it. The legal system, one might say, includes both right and wrong, legal as well as illegal behavior. In fact, its identity as a system hinges precisely upon this disjunction.

In modern legal systems, to be sure, special importance is conceded to organizations where legal questions are handled professionally, uninterruptedly, and—whenever necessary—by means of

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a division of labor (e.g., law firms, courts, legal advisory boards, or legislative bodies). Equally characteristic of modern noncorporative society, however, is the fact that none of its primary subsystems can be reduced to the compact unity of an organization. The religious system cannot be exclusively identified with the church, nor the political system with the apparatus of government, nor the educational system with schools and universities, nor the economic system with organizations of production. Similarly, the legal system cannot be reduced to the organizations which operate within it.

Historically, it might be added, the establishment of legal jurisdiction (under the auspices of a political authority capable of making and enforcing binding decisions) is only *one* of several preconditions for a differentiation of the legal system from its social environment. This *organizational* innovation, indeed, is a sort of "preadaptive advance" that might conceivably be arrested and does not necessarily lead to the society-wide differentiation in question. Classical China is a paradigmatic example here because of the way legal decisions were permitted while being culturally and counterinstitutionally devalued and discouraged (Escarra 1936; Cohen 1966; Bodde and Morris 1967). As a result, general social problems stemming from the uncertainty of expectations and the danger of unlimited conflicts simply reappeared in different guises within the jurisdiction of law. They were only partly mitigated by recourse to extralegal means such as institutionalized expectations of compromise, power and status differences, personal and professional relationships, organized guilds, and so forth. Moreover, analyses of those relatively advanced developing countries which already possess industries, communication systems, and political bureaucracies, show that this arrest of organizational development at the "preadaptive" stage, and the resulting diversion of problems into other social channels, remains now as before a real possibility (Cohn 1965; Aubert 1969, 1972; Gessner 1976; Luhmann 1975f). Neither the existence of organizational centers to which appeal can be made nor the capacity of these centers for handing down decisions makes it unnecessary to ask the following questions: What are the social preconditions for the emergence of a functionally specific and "autonomous" legal system? And what are the consequences of this differentiation?

As already suggested, questions about the differentiation of the legal system from its surrounding social milieu cannot be adequately answered by reference to particular institutions or organizations. In order to develop a serviceable concept of the legal system, social theory must adopt a broader approach: the formation of organizations should be viewed as only one factor among many. Social systems in general, and therefore society *tout court*, consist of "acts of communication" (and not of concrete "men"). Thus, we have to begin with the assumption that formation of systems is rendered possible by various "constraints" on processes of communication. This fits a general pattern, at any rate, since we know (for example) that the combinatory freedom of language is made possible by constraints on the use of sounds, while the combinatory freedom of scientific theories is made possible by constraints on use of language.[2] Law itself, as a way of constraining behavioral expectations, is found in every society. Without it, social interaction would be impossible.[3] The functional specialization of a discrete legal system, however, presupposes certain peculiarly law-related constraints. These necessarily preexistent constraints can be applied in two distinct ways within processes of communication. My thesis, stated succinctly, is that the successive separation and recombination of these two applications ushers in the process whereby a legal system can become relatively autonomous.

Whenever individuals can explicitly appeal to constraints on behavior, they can also consider whether or not they want to do so. As a result, everyday processes of communication have an ineliminable power over the law: the power to decide if law is to be invoked or not. Here lies what I want to call *invocation sovereignty*. It remains an open question whether or not preferences, expectations, refusals, or conflicts are to be discussed with reference to law. This must be decided in elementary interaction. The freedom either to "juridify" or "not to juridify" events increases when there is a universalistic web of norms that can in principle subsume every elementary transaction of daily life, thereby making it possible to stipulate for every state of affairs whether it is lawful or not.[4] Such freedom depends (as every freedom does) on a prepatterning of behavior. Individuals can either build upon this basis or not. The validity of law, in other words, cannot be separated from the fact that the application of law is contingent: we can either appeal to it or not, as the case may be. We have this choice. We can invoke or not invoke the law, "juridify" or "not juridify," do this or that. And the option itself could not exist without the law. Like all social behavior, contingent decisions to invoke the law have numerous preconditions. Such choices always depend upon diverse social variables such as age, sex, education, and social status—to mention only those easy to inventory empirically. As a result, decisions are "processed" in interaction in such a way that even the sequence with which acts of communication follow one another has an influence on whether or not laws are mentioned, and finally, on whether or not the courts get involved. In all this, of course, law remains a *causa passiva*. It can make available its capacity to be cited, but it cannot, on its own, determine what decision will eventually be made.

This is one way to make use of legally valid constraints or regulations. The other possibility involves the content of norms. We try to discover norms, formulate them, interpret them or modify them, change them or multiply them. In this case, law is viewed as material upon which to work. And here again constraints generate freedom and possibilities for control. As a logical consequence, they also produce an additional problem: invocation sovereignty (sovereignty to decide whether to invoke the law) is confronted with *lawmaking sovereignty* (sovereignty to decide *what* the law is to be). Our freedom to transform and reshape the law increases proportionally with the number of legal restrictions, constraints, or regulations—especially if there is a high degree of interdependence between regulations. This is the case because opposed to any single set of legal rules there are always others to which appeal can be made. If necessary, one set of constraints can be played off against another set. After a certain "critical mass" is surpassed, in fact, the form of relationship established between general legal premises and particular legal cases changes (Luhmann 1972c). Eventually, law becomes dynamic. That is to say, it becomes quite normal for an application of the law to trigger clarifying interpretations or even a thoroughgoing critique of the law (Nörr 1974). In the end, law is made "positive." We claim an inalienable sovereignty to decide what the law is to be and even to vary the premises according to which such legislative decisions are made.

The clear separation of these two forms for treating law as contingent (of these two forms of structurally produced freedom) creates a novel situation that does not emerge in every society. The separation itself can function as a kind of evolutionary catalyst accelerating the differentiation of the legal system from its social environment (Luhmann 1970b). If everyday interaction generates both frequent appeals to the law and a sufficient diversity of legal cases, legislative bodies and higher courts will be stimulated to formulate guidelines for consistent decision-making which cover a wide variety of cases. Such institutions will become increasingly conscious of their own premises. Conversely, the more thoroughly articulated law becomes, the easier it is to "discover" legal problems in numerous situations of everyday life and to rely upon a background awareness of possible decisions (transmitted by the law) as an instrument in private dealings. This routine grouping of contingent decisions into general or typical cases promotes the discreteness or relative autonomy of a special subsystem for communicating about law.

For the sake of analysis, we must draw a distinction between genetic and functional methods of inquiry. Origins and initial developments present a separate and very special set of problems. They can, of course, be analyzed within our general theoretical framework. Nonetheless, we should never lose sight of the fact that the original genesis of institutions demands special structural preconditions both in the social system and in its environment. The initial emergence of agrarian economies, for example, was linked to specific environmental conditions, which later became unnecessary. They were outgrown as soon as such economies became more mature and well entrenched. So too, the city-states of early Mesopotamia and again of the ancient Mediterranean world presumably provided special preconditions for formulating and recurrently appealing to commercial law and (later) to constitutional law. This law was "independent" in the sense of not needing to be deduced from religious axioms. The original preconditions for institutional "take off," of course, do not have to remain in place. The maintenance of an autonomous legal system, for example, does not require the continued existence of its initial preconditions. What does remain necessary, however, is the fundamental fact of dual sovereignty, a differentiation between the input of cases (invocation) and the input of decision-premises (lawmaking). It is this differentiation which first produces what can be called the "relational" problem. If sociostructural changes ever affect this fundamental condition, processes of dedifferentiation will set in. Law itself, of course, would survive as a structure necessary in every society. But the legal system would be transformed into a "specification mechanism" for other social sectors, if no longer for religion, then for the organizations of production or for politics.

As a result of the emergence of a discrete or specialized legal system, the society-wide function of law is reconstructed with reference to the unmistakable separation between the legal system and its environment *within* society. The function of law and the problem it solves remain relevant to all of society. Law can be presupposed and appealed to everywhere, though only by crossing a clearly demarcated boundary.

II

The emergence of a separate and functionally specialized legal system has enormous consequences not only for law itself but also for the other sectors of society. When necessary, other social systems can now employ specifically legal means, without thereby landing in incalculable entanglements or diffuse relations of dependence. For this purpose, law provides an instrument which has relatively precise contours, even if it may also have limited effectiveness. For instance, capital accumulation (and attendant possibilities for rational economic calculation) is based on *property law*. This legal principle, of course, does not guarantee that capital will actually be accumulated nor that rational economic investment (whatever criteria we use to define it) will take place. This depends upon other facets of the economic system. Without property law, however, capital accumulation could not be sheltered from a diffuse social pressure to give up one's surplus. This is equally true for private ownership and for collective ownership. In its classical form, to be sure, the legal principle of property ownership simultaneously guaranteed that law would not interfere with economic calculations. In the modern welfare state, by contrast, we find law employed for the direct and indirect burdening of property. As a consequence, we also find here, for the first time, that a structural influence on the economy (for example, on the relation between capital costs and personnel costs) can be achieved through legislative and judicial stipulation. This influence, however, is neither politically intended nor economically preferred. That is to say, it is nowhere desired, nowhere controlled, and nobody in particular takes responsibility for it.

We can take another example from the field of education. Here the correspondingly central "legal principle" lies in *universally obligatory public schooling.* So far as the technicalities of law are concerned, this is a straightforward and unproblematic principle. From the viewpoint of educational politics, by contrast, it is the fundamental condition for establishing a large, differentiated public school system comprising the entire population. At the same time, it has a dramatic impact upon education within the family. Universal obligatory schooling was likewise a precondition for secularizing the educational system, that is to say, for differentiating it from religion. The pedagogical import of universal schooling, in other words, is next to incalculable, even though legal techniques and educational practice do not interfere with one another in a noteworthy way.

From these two examples we can see how the development of a separate legal system not only ensures a degree of rationality and independence in the application of norms, but also provides legal "instruments" necessary for the functional and structural differentiation of society as a whole. For this reason, the autonomy of the legal system is significant for the entire social order. Other, more complicated relations should be added to those already mentioned. Since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for example, *constitutional law* has made it unnecessary to offer theoretical arbitration for disputes between orthodoxies making moral and religious claims. It has achieved this by guaranteeing a *modus vivendi* instead. This, in turn, prepared the way for a differentiation between religion and science (Specht 1972, esp. p. 91). In a similar fashion, *civil law* rendered largely superfluous the political arbitration of conflicts of interest. This immediately reduced the political functions of the community to the extent that a "state" could be separated out of it, then constitutionalized, and eventually even democratized.

Perhaps even more important, a sufficiently distinct legal system was the prerequisite for a high degree of individualization in decisions having structural importance for society. The category of "private," as we all know, was valued upward. Personal or individual freedom was designated a legal norm. Decisions about ultimate belief, about filling certain political offices, about choosing a spouse and begetting children, about investing capital and lengthening school attendance, about selecting intellectual and political issues for research, are all now left up to individuals, even though the aggregation of the consequences of such decisions can have a profound impact on the structural development of society. This sort of radical privatization, in point of fact, was a precondition for the transition to a society differentiated primarily along functional lines. Only in this way could functional sectors for religion, politics, economics, and family life become more clearly compartmentalized than before, and their mutual connections left up to private role-management. Only in this way was it possible to undercut the old stratified or feudal ascription of the entire person or household to specific subsystems of society, and for everyone to achieve access to all functional domains of society.[5] And only in this way was it possible in a relatively short span of time (that is, with relative independence from demographic developments) to reach that degree of size in single sectors necessary for a functionally differentiated social system.

When a single functional domain radiates in all directions and becomes the structural condition for the differentiation of society itself as well as for the degree to which society's various subsystems can become autonomous, we can expect its special status to be recognized openly (note that it is not merely a question of the distinct functional requirements of diverse sectors of society or of the special relevance of law for guiding and regulating the legal system itself).[6] Beyond all this, at least during a specific historical stage in the evolution of society, the emergence of a functionally specific legal system appears to possess special significance as an achievement of social evolution: it is a condition for all further social evolution. Hence, to some extent at least, even the hypostatization of law within political philosophy had a certain foundation in reality. The new, society-wide importance of law, in other words, may explain why law played such an important role in the concept and theory of "bourgeois society." This, indeed, seems to be the reason why, in the late theory of natural law, society came to be conceived precisely as a "contract," and why later, at the hands of Hegel, social theory was developed within the framework of a philosophy of law. And this also seems to be the reason why, on the level of real processes of social communication, lawyers have moved into a position of society-wide responsibility far outstripping their special function and competence. And this may even explain why lawyers tend to be progressive rather than conservative.

The foregoing analysis, however, fails to answer the question of whether the special preconditions for the initial emergence of an autonomous legal system must continue to exist (Unger 1975, pp. 192ff). In other words, we have not yet determined whether the special sociostructural preeminence of law and its philosophical hypostatization were only conditions for the transition from a stratified to a functionally differentiated society or if they also belong to the ineliminable prerequisites for the continuance of a society differentiated primarily along functional lines. If the preeminence and hypostatization of law are necessary conditions for functional differentiation, they could be dropped only at the cost of de-differentiating society. This would entail the structural transformation of the entire social order—the "socialist" restructuring of society as a large-scale organization and the reintroduction of stratification in regard to careers. We do not know, in other words, if this preeminence of the legal system must also be listed among the conditions necessary for maintaining a functionally differentiated society after it has emerged.

III

This sort of question can by no means be answered by analyzing only the legal system. Nonetheless, by attending to developments within the legal system, we can discover problems of stress as well as processes of self-restructuring with which the system (so long as it operates in a relatively autonomous fashion) reacts to transformations in the same way a changing social environment handles the law. This is why, in the theoretical model presented in the opening section, I tried to give special weight to transformations influencing either the presentation of legal cases to the system (that is, the readiness to juridify situations of daily life) or the legislative formulation of new "constraining decision premises" or the process of putting these two forms of legal input into relation with one another.

Relevant transformations of considerable importance concern (1) political control over introducing decision premises into the legal system; (2) an increasing "consequentialism" (or attention to expected consequences) within the decision-making practice of judges, and even in the "dogmatic" formulation of decision patterns; (3) the predecision to invoke the law on the basis of extralegal variables; and (4) differentiations within the field of the legal profession. One can assume that each of these specific changes has distinct causes and authorizing grounds. They are, however, closely interrelated because of the unity of the legal system, and they certainly influence one another. Their combined effect, as a result, is very difficult to calculate or appraise.

(1) The constraints on judicial decisions introduced by way of lawmaking sovereignty make possible a complex (though limited) sort of argumentation in the legal system: argumentation that aims at excluding the irrelevant.[7] This, in turn, makes possible a narrowing of issues and a specification of problems. And these in turn allow for the autonomy of legal decisions. Only in this way can "pertinent" criticism be identified and "extraneous" criticism warded off. Of course, none of this implies that such constraints could be conjured up magically, on the very highest level of abstraction, with all-inclusive vagueness or in a social void. Today, in fact, constraints on judicial decision-making are typically furnished by political agencies and processes. Freedom in handling or manipulating these constraints, on the other hand, is a subsequent gain. It only emerges after they begin to function routinely within the legal system.

Political systems have their own particular circularity in their roundabout flow of influence on decisions running between political processes in the narrow sense, the state bureaucracy, and the public.[8] In this circle of influence, political systems always react primarily to themselves and only in so doing do they also react to their social environment. Politics, in accord with its specific function, aims at producing collectively binding decisions even without consensus, and along the way it makes use of some of the same organizations as the legal system. Nevertheless, its "selectivity" is oriented differently from that of the legal system. As a consequence, the fact that parliaments enact legislation is a constant problem for the legal system—a problem, moreover, that cannot be banished from the earth by the legal "binding" of politics to constitutional law, and that also does not vanish suddenly with the introduction of a purportedly all-inclusive concept of "the State." This problem is made manifest, for example, in the massive quantity and poor quality of incessantly produced legislative norms and in that political processes often react most vigorously to pictures of the real and the desirable which are, in fact, produced within these processes themselves. This means that politics is not necessarily suitable for clarifying legal problems, especially on a level where many decisions are aggregated together, or even to function there as a source for forming and stabilizing expectations.[9]

No functionally specialized system can operate efficiently in contact with neighboring sectors of society without making decisions at levels of high aggregation.[10] It must be possible to predecide large clusters of particular decisions by selectively neglecting most of the details. The legal system has created this possibility partly in the concepts and theories of its juristic "dogmatics," and partly in the "casuistics" of guiding principles contained in the legal pronouncements and opinions of the highest courts. Legislation, by contrast, has in practice ignored this task. It cannot be offered up to the electorate as a "reform"; moreover, it contains the danger of increasing public awareness of problems that cannot be solved politically. The question, then, is how legal "dogmatics" and the "casuistics" of guiding principles are related to legislation which has at its disposal the resources for binding legality. In reaction to this situation, judges assume conspicuously broad freedoms in dealing with the law.[11] Indeed, judicial discretion is provoked simply by the technically mediocre quality of legislator-written law. But how does "dogmatics" handle this inadequacy?

(2) It tilts *forward* to meet the flight into the future: it attends to consequences. Ostensibly, the calculation of consequences serves as a kind of norm-independent test of the *social relevance* of legal cases and legal positions. Social relevance, as a result, is not specified exclusively by the evaluative content of norms. Instead, it is "temporalized" or revealed by a detour through the dimension of time.[12] One of the central theoretical questions for today's jurisprudence, it seems to me, concerns the extent to which this is possible for legal decisions.[13] What no one disputes is the actual prevalence of the phenomenon, this is, of the fact that lawyers and judges argue by appealing to consequences and believe in the decision-making value of this style of argumentation. On the other hand, it is equally correct that we can *pretend* to foresee and calculate consequences—on the basis, for example, of rational scientific models—in a way that no one in practice, and *a fortiori* no judge or lawyer in the decision-making situations typical for them, could actually do. To be sure, the horizon of the future cannot simply be screened out or banished from decision-making procedures. On the other hand, no one seriously considers revising a particular decision or verdict when the foreseen consequences do not in fact follow or when the consequences that were to be prevented nonetheless take place. So what is actually at stake here?

For sociologists, in the first place, there is a problem that must be seen in historical or dynamic perspective—a problem of the degree to which a further extension of legal consequentialism is possible. For processes of judicial decision-making, the questions are these: How far into the future is it possible to pursue an orientation toward consequences and how multifaceted and precise can the classification of relevant consequences be, without having the decision process become overburdened and thereby corrupted? How, in other words, does the breaking down (some say factorization) of the decision-making process take place, and how justified is this analysis of the relevant elements and relations, this "defiguration of facts?"[14] And finally, to what extent is this analysis process still controllable? If we momentarily overlook the technical difficulties and costs of decision-making, the tendency toward an increasingly unlimited pursuit of future consequences produces the following three problems:

First of all, attention to consequences in situations of high interdependence tends to erode social differentiation. It threatens to conflate and confound specifically juristic decision-making activities with general social engineering of a welfare-state variety. Whenever a lawyer is primarily concerned with promoting satisfactory life conditions, specifically juristic decision-making procedures slip into a marginal position: at best they signal limits of the possible.[15] The various consequences of the slippage must be studied in a theory of professions. For jurisprudence the result is a tendency either to argue with naïve overestimation of its own conceptual apparatus or to end up being incorporated into capacious organizations for the planning and shaping of all social life.

Secondly, heightened pretensions of taking consequences into account tend to loosen, subjectify, and politicize the bases of judgment in single decisions. "The major consequence of a heroic conception of the consequences of action is a distrust of judgment," or so say political scientists working within the framework of decision theory (Cohen and March 1974, p. 204). Such a development not only affects public confidence in the administration of law, but also changes techniques for procurement of information, argumentation, and the presentation of evidence in court. The growing burden of decision-making is unloaded onto the parties involved, who (in the meantime) have less and less trust in the official bases of judgment. The moment arrives when we are most willing to risk litigation in cases where *a literal application* of the law would foreseeably lead to farcical or scandalous consequences.

The third problem of unlimited consequentialism is this: one must also *justify* the rules for where to stop, the foreshortenings of vision, and the numerous abridgements which identify *what* consequences can be legitimately introduced into the reasons for a decision. Justification by reference to consequences then becomes self-referential, circular, autonomous, or "sovereign." There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this. In a functionally differentiated society, in fact, such circularity can be routinely tolerated and limited, *so long as* self-reference is tied down to the specific function of the system in question. Precisely this, however, becomes difficult when orientation toward consequences (because in itself unlimited) provides no solid foothold, and when, in addition, the introduction of constraining premises is thoroughly politicized. But does not the fact that decisions are made in a case-by-case fashion provide at least some inherent limitation or structural support? And might this not penetrate to levels of highly aggregated decisions, and adequately guarantee that, through the selection of justificatory consequences, decisions will be made according to specifically legal rather than extralegal standards?

(3) The "legal case," too, presents a multifaceted problem. Lawyers themselves, and more quickly than others, become aware of the methodological problems involved in applying general rules to particular cases. The fact that legal problems arise in a case-by-case fashion, however, has a more profound significance. Even before being handled in a methodologically correct fashion, "cases" have already helped filter out inequalities from processes of applying the law (Aubert 1963). Situations are simplified, idealized or "reconstructed" into cases allowing for identical treatment. By means of such constructions, specific components of a case are generalized. This process, in fact, is a precondition for decidability and justice. At the same time, it implies that other components belonging to the concrete case are to be treated as fluke accompaniments (Ray 1926, p. 154). Most important of all, the actual occurrence of the case is regarded as a sheer accident. It is in no way regulated by the underlying structures of law or the legal system. This is a mirror image within the legal system of the sovereignty to invoke or not invoke the law in situations of daily life. Unfortunately, we know very little about its preconditions.

To all appearances, the probability that law will be invoked depends upon "proximity" to law as well as on earlier experiences with legal decisions (Cartwright and Schwartz 1973; Carlin et al. 1967; Koch and Zenz 1972). How does it come about that certain interactions veer "close" to the law and others not? The boundaries of the legal system, it is worth noting, must not be conceived as sharply etched, unambiguous lines of demarcation which can be "stepped across" or not. Instead, they must be conceived as zones of an incremental probability of citation. The manner in which such gradated proximity to law comes about depends on numerous factors that cannot be easily controlled within the legal system. If this is the case, then one can say that these structures are bound to influence the legal system in an uncontrolled and differentiation-eroding way. This phenomenon has been discussed in relation to stratification, the urban/rural distinction and (in the United States) with reference to race. However, it presumably has a much more general significance which involves a prestructuring of the very subject matter of decisions themselves (Mayhew and Reiss, 1969; Abel-Smith, et al., 1973). Within its own organizational domain, to be sure, the legal system has several strategies available for neutralizing or weakening its passive dependence on the "input" of cases. For instance, it can pick out certain cases for special publicity or it can misuse one case in order to make it known how other cases will be decided in the future. Besides these, even more aggressive strategies can be imagined by which the legal system might reach out into its environment to enhance or equalize public readiness to invoke the law. What patrons in stratified societies did for their dependents or retainers and what occurs today through (sometimes extralegal) personal contact (Merton 1968, pp. 126ff; Rosenn 1971) could well be pursued more vigorously by officially promoted legal consultation. The success of such actions, however, would depend on nonorganizable environmental conditions.[16] And most unsettling of all, such efforts (tending toward "social work") collide head-on with the self-understanding of lawyers and judges, with their education and income.[17]

(4) The professional consciousness of those who practice law, the cohesion of the legal profession as a result of a shared education, pressures to make abstractions typical for the entire group, and a functional interdependence of roles all first became possible through the differentiation of the legal system from its social environment. Today, moreover, such factors belong among the most important conditions for the continued existence of a legal system that manages to function in a relatively autonomous fashion. Here too, however, we can discern structurally significant changes that threaten to fracture the cohesion of the legal profession (Luhmann 1975d). The most important of these are the dizzying proliferation of texts to which lawyers constantly have to refer and the multi-

plication of reference groups (courts, organizations, interest groups, customers, and so forth), with which lawyers have to coordinate their careers and attitudes.[18] As a likely point for professional reforms in this area only education comes into the picture. Educational reforms, however, tend under pressure to split the profession along political and generational lines. In the near future, then, it is not to be expected that a new centralization of the entire profession around the concept of professional work could either inhibit or reverse the erosion of a group cohesion. But perhaps a weakening of cohesion is one way to allow systems to survive in extremely complex and rapidly changing environments.

There are no doubt additional factors significant for continuing or abolishing the relative autonomy of the legal system—for example, changes which undermine the distinctness of legal norms themselves and cause them to be reintegrated into moral, scientific (social scientific?), or pedagogical contexts (Luhmann 1972a, pp. 222ff). More important than lengthening this list, however, is drawing an inference from the very multiplicity of the factors which in fact work together.

Structural changes in the social environment of the legal system obviously affect this system in a variety of ways. They affect "invocation sovereignty" and "lawmaking sovereignty," which in turn regulate the entrance of cases and constraining decision premises through the gateways of the legal system. Furthermore, such environmental changes can affect professional consciousness as well as "dogmatics," which in turn represent the relative autonomy of the legal system against the claims of the two "sovereignties." The mixture and interaction of these factors inside the legal system can either increase or weaken the influence of environmental change upon the system. So long as we still do not understand the rules according to which this occurs, we can only try to break down the general problem of the autonomy of the legal system into smaller ones. My point is that, in so doing, we must pay especially close attention to structurally relevant occurrences in the fields of political legislation, daily interaction, "dogmatics," and the consciousness of the legal profession.

7

Politics as a Social System

At the present time, there is no uncontested theoretical foundation for research in the area of governmental politics and administration. The time is past when practical philosophy, which took ethics and natural law as self-evident points of departure, shaped what questions were posed and what answers were considered. "Power" is now used only hesitantly as a fundamental concept and then only for a partial aspect. "The state" has remained a very vague category of little analytical use; it runs the danger of being amplified and constricted by various traditions and prejudices. "Government" is subject to the opposite weakness; by being viewed more precisely as an institution or organization, it no longer is understandable in its own terms.

It seems that for some years the concept of a political system has been forcing its way into this theoretical vacuum and spreading rapidly for want of competing concepts. This is happening chiefly in the form of model building, developing different kinds of schemes for describing the structure and course of political processes (Easton 1965a; Almond 1965; Wiseman 1966; Nettl 1966; Senghaas 1968). Reflection upon what way political systems are indeed systems has only just begun (Easton 1965). It has not yet adequately clarified the advantages and limits of this conceptual approach. And it has by no means made use of what it could learn

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from general systems theory, cybernetics, the sociology of social systems, the sociology of organizations, ethnology, psychological systems theory, and many more. At this stage of research it is not yet possible to pass a well-founded judgment on what the concepts of systems theory will be able to accomplish in this area. Opinions one way or the other will have to be preliminary, if not premature.

It is thus all the more attractive to apply some general ideas in systems-theory from various disciplines to political systems. In this way, raising the level of abstraction will allow the interconnections and consistency of various premises, concepts, and forms of research to show forth more clearly.

In this essay I shall attempt to show that (1) the *differentiation* of the political system as a particular realm of action distinct from the rest of society and (2) the great *autonomy* of this system within society allows it to develop (3) a *functional specification* in issuing binding decisions and creating social power. Together with this differentiation there is an increase in (4) the *internal complexity* and *selectivity* of the political system, and hence (5) an enhancement of its capacities for communication through *power becoming generalized and reflexive.* This makes (6) an *internal functional differentiation* of the political system necessary, as well as an ability to take over problems from elsewhere in the society. In particular, this requires (7) *internal safeguards against risks.* Taken all together, these different variables explain how (8) *political functions can be stabilized at a higher level of social complexity.*

I. Differentiation

We can speak of there being a social system only to the extent that the system can be distinguished from its environment. Moreover, the agents themselves, and not merely sociological theory, must be able to recognize the boundary between system and environment.[1] To the extent that this is the case, the system is "differentiated" from its environment. Whatever happens in its environment does not automatically happen in the system as well.

The differentiation of social systems from their social environment can arise at various levels of meaning. It can apply to actual

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persons, assigning them completely to only one subsystem.[2] It can apply more abstractly (and this is the general case) to particular roles or even only to particular goals and norms or individual values. The differentiation of the political system takes place primarily at the level of roles. The individuals who perform political and administrative functions cannot have their whole lives separated from the rest of society.[3] Role differentiation thus leads to a corresponding differentiation between decision-programs and values. But this latter form of differentiation is not by itself structurally sufficient, since the political system applies legal norms and represents values which always claim to be valid in and for society at large. Only at the level of roles can this process of differentiation be carried out unambiguously, so that it is usually recognizable whether a role (e.g., civil servant, member of parliament, party secretary, voter, or petitioner) can be attributed to the political system.

Frequently, this kind of differentiation is characterized as "role separation." But that can lead to misunderstandings. In reality, it is a *change in the way roles are combined to support social structure.*

In simple societies the certainty of expectations rests on a person's playing a combination of roles. These societies, too, exhibit a number of different kinds of roles, but they are so minor that the same people are always meeting each other in the different roles. Hence, expectations, mediated by personal identities, are transferred from the context of one role to another. A person's behavior in one role provides grounds for inferring what his behavior may be in another. One who fails as a neighbor cannot be trusted as a warrior. One who takes a false step in opening a dance can endanger a planned marriage. One who is not economically independent cannot gain any political influence. In this kind of social order persons and roles cannot be completely separated. A person must fit a social stereotype, and the interplay of roles has to remain dependent on persons. Social control then influences behavior primarily through each individual's always *taking his other roles into account* (Nadel 1957, p. 63f.). In differentiated systems, on the other hand, the execution of roles is regulated by the behavior *among role partners*; it is made independent of whatever other roles a partner fulfills. Roles inside and outside the political system then

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become mobile in relation to each other (i.e., they come to vary independently of each other). Whether politicians or civil servants are rich or poor, into which families they marry, to which gods they pray, which circles they frequent, with whom they are friends or neighbors, with whom they have been prisoners of war, and to whom they owe money—all this is not supposed to be of any structural importance. At most, it has only a tactical value in establishing "relations." The political system has to be able to accept that such "relations" in personal backgrounds change with those who hold the roles. It has to be indifferent, in its ability to survive even if not in its tactics, to the interweaving of roles in society, while at the same time treating and exploiting them as lucky opportunities. Only in this way can society be made the *object* of politics and administration.

This restructuring will at first be seen as a loss of aid in social orientation, leading necessarily to a corresponding loss of security. However, individual roles will still be able to be combined temporally, materially, and socially. In order to ensure this, they must be oriented toward universal criteria, independent of persons and their particular relations. This is best achieved through a causal (rather than cosmic or symbolic) understanding of human action. If action is understood as causing effects, a process of rationalizing roles is triggered. Such a process emphasizes how every action causes specific effects, while also requiring abstract norms and values, and ultimately pragmatically handled ideologies, to provide criteria for deciding who has to take on which role for the sake of which effects and at what time.[4] This requires the morally sanctioned attitudes of objectivity, justice (in the sense of the principle of equality), and impartiality from those engaged in politics and administration. With this, the requirements for recruitment into political and bureaucratic roles are also changed. Individuals no longer need or can rely on ascriptive criteria predetermined by birth, nor on roles outside the political system. Instead, they must develop criteria of ability and efficiency which are appropriate to the system (naturally "good relations" can prove important here!).[5] Predetermined social status also loses its importance: saddlers and painters, corporals, and even those who have not served in the military can be entrusted with political leadership. The domain of

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possible recruitment grows, and thus the opportunities for selection as well. At the same time the political system becomes so complex that this alone offers protection against the sudden invasion of new forces. Newcomers have to work for some time at their careers; they have to be trained and tested before they can act. Periods of apprenticeship are always periods of socialization as well: the requisite feelings and attitudes are imparted along with information and skills.[6] Hence, mobility, selectivity, and rules of recruitment are indispensable in the far-reaching differentiation of the political system from the rest of society.

II. Autonomy

When differentiation succeeds at the level of roles, it paves the way for the relative autonomy of the political system at the level of decision-making criteria. The roles of the political system then interact within certain limits among themselves, developing their own regulative standards. In contrast to a mere differentiation of particular roles or particular criteria, the concept of autonomy has to do with self-determination—the ability to settle upon selective criteria for transactions with the environment and to change them if need be.

Autonomy should not be confused with self-sufficiency. Self-sufficiency means isolation and independence from physical and informational aspects of the environment. Autonomy, by contrast, presupposes this kind of independence and refers to the degree of freedom with which the selective criteria of the system can regulate the relations between system and environment.

Securing relative autonomy for the political system has been, from a historical perspective, an extremely long process of development, full of setbacks, which was first able to attain a position of stability in the modern nation-states of Europe. This shows that very complicated preconditions had to be fulfilled by the structure of society. Following some general ideas from systems-theory, which cannot be further examined here, we can distinguish three dimensions along which the conditions for autonomy lie. Temporally, autonomy depends on the environment's giving the system

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time to insert its own ways of processing information. Materially, it is important that the system remain linked to the environment at two different generalized levels of meaning. And socially the differentiation of the environment into distinct partner systems is essential.

In order to be autonomous, a system must first of all "have time." It cannot always be forced to react immediately to outside impulses;[7] instead, it must have the time to apply its own processes of selecting causes and effects. This requirement is normally represented by an input-output model which basically inserts the system's own processes between temporally separated causes and effects in the environment (Easton 1965a; Almond 1965). By thus separating its boundary times, the system can use intended effects (goals) to select the appropriate causes or imposed causes to select the appropriate additional causes and desired effects. Furthermore, the system then gains a certain freedom to switch these opposite perspectives as the need arises, and thus to choose the criteria of selection itself.[8] However, the limits imposed by the environment on this passage of time let time within the system become scarce, and this scarcity of time burdens both the formation of consensus (since that costs time) and the actual choice of programs and decisions (whatever is limited becomes urgent whatever its value) (Luhmann 1968c). In order to save time and use it rationally, a system sets up its own timetables that cannot be fully coordinated with timetables in the environment. This again creates difficulties in adaptation.

In a system's material relations to its environment, its autonomy depends especially upon these contacts being stabilized at (at least) two different levels of generalization. A political system must be more or less generally accepted in its social environment. As a system it must enjoy political credit, which does not rest upon its making specific promises about what its decisions will be. This credit is not created by a continued bartering, or taken back after every failure. Below this level of wholesale acceptance and the authorization to make decisions, we find the level of concrete interactions, which fulfill the function of the political system. General acceptance and the symbols representing it regulate and limit what is possible at the more concrete level of daily transactions. Seen

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from the other side, there are thresholds built between these levels that block the transfer of breakdowns and disappointments from the more concrete to the more abstract realm. Mechanisms for absorbing protest, for example jurisdiction, have this function. The separation of these two levels is reinforced by the differentiation between important and unimportant topics within the system. But this separation seems especially to rest on the fact that for the acceptance of the system there exist different kinds of functional equivalents than those for the solutions to problems that are sought in concrete interactions.[9]

In the social dimension the most important condition for autonomy is that the political system not see itself faced with one solid power in the environment (e.g. a church or a big stockholder), but instead depend on several relevant environments. The differentiation of the environment can consist in a number of identical environments—e.g. the families, clans, and *gentes* of simpler societies—or today in a number of equally famous professors providing advice or a number of organizations giving access to the capital market. But the environment can also be split up (and this is more important today) into a number of functionally differentiated subsystems. Thus, today, for example, the sources of religious legitimation, the sources of reliable information, the sources of economic support, the sources of personally motivated willingness to take on roles all diverge. Of the corresponding subsystems in society it is only demanded that sector by sector they meet specific needs of the political system. The political system can then negotiate with each individual system by relying on the backing of other domains in the environment and balancing the way these various contributions are combined. This requires a rather highly abstract structure. Furthermore, care must be taken that the internal differentiation of the political system (see section VII below) does not come to correspond to the external differentiation of the environment. If so, the parts of the system will identify with environmental factors, or cross-boundary alliances will be so likely that the political system will lose its function of integrating society and fall to pieces.[10]

When we combine these different presuppositions of high autonomy within the system, we already have a very complex picture that we can hardly visualize. To every relevant section of the en-

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vironment we must imagine the political system to have relations at various levels of generalization, and these relations must have different time limits for regulating input and output. The improbability of such a social order is obvious, and explains why it appeared late in history and indeed only once.[11] But relative autonomy together with adequate differentiation is indispensable if the political system is going to be specialized for a particular function which has no parallel elsewhere in society.

III. Functional Specification

As we have seen, the differentiation of a system from the rest of society makes it possible to delimit and specify functionally the context in which persons anticipate the roles others will play, and the context in which they motivate and check each other. In this way the technical advantages of a division of labor can be gained. The specific function of politics in society can be analyzed so that we can discern its own laws and rationale. Religious, economic, cultural, familial, educational, scientific, and military contexts confront the political system as environments that demand appropriate attention but without determining what political and administrative actions are performed.

In other words, by this process of differentiation and the conditions favoring high autonomy within the system, the political system is put in the position of *being able to make decisions*. The specific function of politics is fulfilled at the level of concrete interaction because these decisions are made *binding*.[12] A decision is binding whenever, and for whatever reasons, it succeeds in effectively restructuring the expectations of those affected and thus becomes the premise for their future behavior. It is a matter, then, of actual learning, and not just formal validity.[13]

A political system's potential for assuming the specific function of making binding decisions must increase as society grows more complex and increasingly poses problems that can no longer be solved by reference to truths or common convictions, or by mutual sympathy or exchange, but instead only through decisions. The differentiation, autonomy, and functional specification of a political

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system are thus consequences of the increasing complexity of society as well as prerequisites for a further increase in this complexity. With increasing complexity, it is increasingly likely that the advantages of efficiency lying in functional specification will be realized.

Two aspects of our characterization of the specific function of politics as the issuing of binding decisions remain to be discussed—those dealing with which decisions are made and the motives that underlie their acceptance. A political system that has been differentiated from the rest of society can no longer bind itself in those areas.[14] It must be able to vary the issues it decides upon, depending on which problems the society places on the political agenda. Only then can it orient its decisions toward the fluctuation of problems in society. And it can no longer rely on particular motives for obedience that may lie in individuals, groups, or situations; for example, it cannot rely on a combination of physical force and loyalty, ideological convictions, or the calculation of economic gains. Instead, it must be able to combine and equalize incompatible motives of the most different sorts, so that an almost unmotivated and matter-of-fact acceptance of decisions can arise. Only through structural abstraction, which in both these respects ensures openness while keeping the system stable, can the political system be designed for the function of issuing decisions that will be accepted as binding.[15]

Each of these forms of indeterminacy would be difficult to achieve and maintain. The problem becomes even more acute when they are projected onto each other. This means that the political system must guarantee the acceptance of still undetermined and undefined decisions—in other words, *the legitimacy of legality* (see section VII). Any system that tries to accomplish this will have to maintain a sociologically rather improbable order.[16] The fundamental question of modern political philosophy—under what conditions is such an autonomous form of political domination legally permissible?—must be reformulated into this question: under what conditions can a differentiated, functionally specified political system be stabilized within its social environment?

Our discussion of binding decisions as the function of the political system has so far, however, only focused on the level of concrete

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interactions and their premises. At a much more abstract level the political system has the function of *generating social power.* As a political system is differentiated from the rest of society the amount of available power in all of society also increases.[17] By power I mean (and this point I shall return to in section V) a medium of communication that allows decisions to be transmitted (thus, it is not, as in classical theory, a single cause having specific effects). Through the process of making a specific power base abstract, which has generally been characterized as ensuring peace through an effective monopoly on making legitimate decisions about the use of physical force (Weber 1956, p. 29; Elias 1939), the political system is in a position to differentiate power. The means of physical force are kept in barracks and thus cannot compete with other sources of power. That is why a number of different kinds of power bases can be tapped, developed, and cultivated. Formation of power by means of freely negotiated labor contracts or memberships in organizations is one of the best-known examples. Another is the power that comes from occupying a key position in communication networks. In this way the power available in all of society, and not just the power of the political system, can increase significantly while being related to very different constellations of motives, as befits the requirements of a highly differentiated society.

IV. Internal Complexity and Selectivity

The most important condition for stabilizing a differentiated and functionally specified system is that it maintain its own complexity at a level corresponding to that of its social environment.[18] By complexity, I mean the totality of possible events—the complexity of the world is all the possible events in the world, the complexity of a system is all the possible events compatible with the structure of the system (Luhmann 1967b). Hence, a high internal complexity entails allowing alternatives, possibilities of variation, dissent, and conflicts in the system. For that to be possible, the structure of the system must be, to a certain degree, indeterminate, contradictory, and institutionalized in a flexible way. Against the natural tendency

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toward simplification and the removal of all uncertainties, it must be kept artificially open and remain underspecified. Outside of cybernetics, it has been seldom recognized that the creation of a tolerable indeterminacy in social systems is an achievement and not a mishap. (Beer 1962, p. 60f.). Typical complaints about the conservatism of bureaucracies (Laski 1930, pp. 70–73), the dogmatic tendencies of ideologies,[19] the lack of political sensitivity in mass political parties (Lohmar 1963), or the decay of a real parliamentary opposition (Ellwein 1966, p. 212), continue to show that even comparatively mobile and changing institutions which are fraught with conflicts are being measured against a degree of complexity that is extremely hard to attain.

But how does a political system arrive at an adequate level of alternatives and possible ways of changing? How does it avoid structural commitments which are far too concrete, which can block its maneuverability, and which—in a changing environment—can lead to crisis and breakdown? In particular, how does it keep the products of historical events from congealing into structures and eliminating other possibilities?

From a general viewpoint, a system's complexity cannot be greater than its ability to reduce complexity.[20] "Other possibilities" are not accessible to a system unless they can be meaningfully experienced, included in decision-making processes, and selectively eliminated. The more drastic the means of reduction are, and the more simply and concretely the decision-making processes are structured, the fewer alternatives a system can have. If it has to fit its environment into a friend/foe scheme because of a lack in sufficiently differentiated and generalized premises for processing experience, then its own behavior has already been fixed in its broad outlines and can vary only tactically. If it lacks internal processes to regulate how it can vary its own causal contributions, the system can only "blame" forces in the environment for particular events. The result is a correspondingly simple image of the environment (Harvey, Hunt, Schroder, 1961; Schroder, Diver, Streufert 1967). A categorical and moralizing form of processing experience becomes inevitable.

In political systems this connection between complexity and selectivity is particularly important (Vickers 1959, p. 104f.). As sys-

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tems, they are specialized in issuing binding decisions. They have to arrive at them. This is so much expected of them that even making no decision is imputed to them as a decision. Under these circumstances, the temptation to use simple means is particularly strong. On the other hand, they, too, can achieve their own complexity, and keep it a feature of their structure, only if they succeed in strengthening the selectivity of their processes. They must be able to coordinate decision-making processes so that the reduction of complexity achieved by one is not lost for the other and does not have to be repeated. Instead, it will be conserved and can be used in a meaningful way.

I am not referring simply to the administrative technique of making decisions according to programs. I also have in mind the political system's own treatment of conflicts. A political system's ability to absorb social conflicts has to increase when society becomes more complex and conflict-ridden. The political system then changes these conflicts from being cases of outright opposition to being cases of regulated, articulate struggles to influence the decision-making centers. The absorption of conflict depends on cases of opposition being transported from the environment of the system to its interior; they are then represented as internal contradictions and, because these new forms bring a different constellation of motives to bear, they can be better solved.[21] However, conflicts can be taken into the system and legitimated only if the complexity of contradictory demands can be channeled toward decisions. That, too, requires selective behavior to be coordinated. A real uncertainty about the eventual outcome must be structurally guaranteed (i.e., power has to be suspended) in order for participants to feel motivated. The participants must be brought into roles which require complementary action (e.g., asking and answering). And they will have to give binding accounts of their position—ones that their opponents can rely on. Only in this way can a controversy become the object of communication; issues can then be better defined and enough alternatives eliminated so that a decision made with minimal selectivity and having minimal social impact can result.

A political system's potential for resolving conflicts must thus be seen as the result of several variables. First, it depends on the extent to which oppositions and conflicts in society at large are

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politicized, or thought to require binding decisions. Secondly, it depends on whether the political system has been sufficiently differentiated from the rest of society so that, in taking over a conflict as its own affair, it can activate new motives. Furthermore, the degree of abstraction and the scope that the structure of the political system has for defining the limits within which conflicts may be permissible are equally important. Finally, and most important of all, the system's potential for conflict depends on how selective processes can be coordinated with one another.

V. Power

Traditional political theory has used the concept of power to designate the point at which it has dealt with this problem of coordinating decisions. This makes understandable the good, if limited, justification there has been for moving the theory of power into the center of political science. The transmission of decisions is, indeed, decisive. Power is the possibility of having one's own decision select alternatives or reduce complexity for others. Nonetheless, the question remains whether the premises of the classical theory of power are indeed adequate, or whether—as James March surmised after long deliberation (March 1966)—they cast the analysis in a form that may fit small groups, but not highly complex systems.

The classical theory is based not on the idea of selectivity but rather on a supposedly causal form of communication. That is, it tries to conceive of power as a cause that brings about specific effects, or generally as the ability to make others act in a way they would not have chosen of their own volition (Dahl 1957). This leads to a transitive, hierarchical conception of power, excluding the possibility of circular and reciprocal power relations. It sees powerholders' calculations essentially as predicting a causal sequence (hence, it presupposes the availability of complete information), that is oriented by fixed needs and by the ability to prevail in cases of conflict. Furthermore, it understands power as a kind of possession that can be gained or lost and that remains constant within the

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system: every loss of power means a corresponding gain of power for an opponent and vice versa.

All of these conceptual presuppositions have to be redefined if we are to construct a concept of power on the basis of systems theory. It will be based on the selectivity of communication. Power then has to be seen as selection based on selection, or as the strengthened selectivity of the system. In comparison to other ways of transferring selections, its peculiarity lies in the selective action (not just the experience) of the powerholder, who in turn selects the action of the subordinate (and not just the experience the subordinate will have). Power exists whenever a decision-maker chooses one specific possibility from among many and when this selection is in turn accepted by others as a premise for their own decision making—even though it obviously is based on a selective decision. Because it is obvious that there are other possibilities, the subordinates are in turn motivated to implement the decision. Their acceptance of the decision takes place because they are aware that permanently stabilized alternatives, unpleasant for all the participants, do exist. One of the most important is the possible use of physical force, but it is hardly the *only* one. Others are perhaps more important today for the internal processes in politics and administration: for example, the withdrawal of important partners from a cooperative effort, breakdowns in technically functioning systems, loss of membership in organizations, the discrediting of various individuals, or an overload of complexity, uncertainty, and responsibility. The possibilities for expanding and distributing power within the system depend on how the alternatives to be avoided can be combined or played off against one another. The desire by all the participants, even if they have opposite goals, to maintain the system remains a condition for making decisions.[22] The extent of power and thus the organizational demands it must meet will vary with the complexity of the total system—i.e., with its number of possibilities.

If the complexity of the system exceeds a certain threshold, power must remain reflexive. That is, it must be applicable to itself (Luhmann 1966b), even at the top of the system.[23] As complexity increases, powerholders can expand their influence only if they let

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themselves be influenced and if this influence is consolidated into predictable structures. By themselves, they could not utilize the decision-making potential of the system or maintain the complexity of the system. In all fully developed political systems, the relative power of one position must be able to influence the relative power of others, if the ability of the decision-making process to make selections is going to be thoroughly strengthened. The flow of power in the system must take the form of passing on premises for making decisions. But that is possible only if the roles in the system have been differentiated from the system's environment—i.e., only if the role a person performs in this system has not been immobilized by his consideration of the other roles he performs elsewhere. The roles in the system must react to influence according to rules that are internal to the system and govern long chains for transmitting decision-making premises.[24]

The reflexivity of broad power-processes underlies, in turn, a further aspect of the political system: its functional differentiation into subsystems that perform various subfunctions in issuing binding decisions.[25] Only when the application of power to power has been stretched across a large domain and yet remains guaranteed is it possible to build subsystems within the political system which, while operating under different and incompatible conditions, are still able to issue decision-making premises for each other and can thus be integrated.

VI. Internal Functional Differentiation

We now return from our discussion of political processes to structural questions. But this time we are concerned not with the differentiation of the political system from the rest of society but instead with its internal division into subsystems.[26] This discussion will round out our overview, allowing us to formulate the hypothesis that differentiation, autonomy, and functional specification revolutionize both the internal processes and the internal structures of the political system. They require not only an increase of selectivity, and hence power, in these processes, but also a functional differentiation of the internal structures of the various subsystems.

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Rather often the decisive criterion for progress has been thought to lie in an increase of functional differentiation (Smelser 1959; LaPalombara 1963, p. 39f.; Eisenstadt 1964; Parsons 1961a). And in fact this does seem to be a necessary condition for the civilizing development of more complex social systems, a condition closely linked with all the other variables we have mentioned. But it is equally certain that this factor cannot be dealt with in isolation (Riggs 1966a and b). Functional differentiation depends on environmental preconditions that can be analyzed, and it gives rise to specific internal problems that must be solved if a functionally differentiated structure is to be formed and maintained.

Roughly speaking, in modern political systems a fundamental differentiation of roles for bureaucratic administration, party politics, and the public seems to take shape—historically, more or less in this order.[27] Bureaucratic administration (in the broad, functional sense that includes parliaments and courts) becomes specialized in elaborating and issuing binding decisions according to politically predetermined criteria; in addition, these decisions must satisfy certain requirements of mutual consistency (i.e., legality and economy). To this end, members of the administration (in contrast to politicians) are given ministries with specific portfolios. To the extent that the bureaucracy's criteria and programs for decision-making become variable—and especially when law is made positive (Luhmann 1967a)—it becomes necessary to set apart a particular sphere of politics, having its own organization and form of work, to deal with forming political support for programs and decisions. For as decision-making premises are allowed to vary, the conditions for political support begin to fluctuate. For the realm of politics in this narrower sense, specific criteria of rationality (e.g., rules for winning elections) are formed to different degrees in different systems. These criteria do not need to conform with the morals of all of society or the specifically bureaucratic ethos of consistent decision-making. Politics thus becomes suspect. Politics and administration are separated not only in terms of roles, but also in terms of their differing subgoals, which can no longer be integrated by some common purpose, but only by built-in auxiliary conditions for decision-making. To the extent that politics and administration are separated by their different functions, a number of roles among the

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public emerge on their own as a third element of the political system. No longer does the citizen, with his wants and his patience, stand as the subject of an undifferentiated authority. Instead, he occupies a number of special roles: taxpayer, proponent of resolutions, complainant, voter, writer of letters to the editor, supporter of interest groups, etc. These roles are divided up in accord with the requirements of the political system, and especially with its channels of communication. They are roles for complementary behavior and, as such, belong within the political system and not in its social environment. Hence, the exercise of influence comes to depend on behavior's conforming to these roles. When along with that a significant differentiation of these roles from the rest of society is guaranteed, much greater freedom can be accorded both to individual behavior and to the way an individual may combine these roles. Their specific function of converting experience with the results of binding decisions into new motives for decision-making can then be fulfilled largely within the system. But this will depend on the political system's being able to create enough alternatives and maintain a complexity that corresponds to that of society.

The importance of this internal functional differentiation can be seen from a comparison with older forms of society, which were based on the opposite principle of segmented differentiation. These societies built identical subunits in the form of families and tribes. Segmented systems are made stable by the vagueness or even irrelevance of definite boundaries with their environment.[28] They can lose or gain segments without altering their structure; family relationships become vague; domination is held in check by the possibility of seceding and by loyalities crossing its boundaries (Schapera 1956, p. 22f., 153f., 175f.; Gluckman 1955; Fallers 1963). In contrast, the stability of functionally differentiated systems is based on clearly demarcated boundaries that make it possible to distinguish which actions belong to which one of the various systems. They separate functional contexts and guard against interference. Fixing *internal* boundaries—as can be seen in the case of the political system—helps to fix *external* boundaries, since it enables the contacts between systems and their environments to be functionally specified. Politics and administration have their respective publics. Corresponding to their own further differentiation

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into parties or departments we find complementary roles differentiated in their publics. Therefore, politics and administration, at least ideally, focus on society across defined boundaries. And only the public can legitimately consider its other roles in those of its actions having to do with politics or administration.[29]

Internal differentiation thus serves to specify and stabilize boundaries. The differentiation of administration, politics, and the public from the rest of society must therefore be carried out differently for each of these particular functions. The administration must be separated, by means of its bureaucratic organization, from the civil servants' other roles in society; this is the main thrust of Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy. The differentiation of politics from the rest of society is based, at the lower levels of party organizations, on the same principle. At the upper levels it is carried out by means of abstract conditions for electoral success—even if less completely, since here other social roles (e.g., the victorious general, the astronaut, the professor) that create publicity provide good starting places for a political campaign.[30] The public is differentiated from the rest of society especially by virtue of its having access only to specific issues and channels of communication. For example, it can, in the role of voter, only choose among simple alternatives, and in making this decision each individual finds himself "overdetermined" by his other roles—i.e., set free.[31] These different mechanisms for achieving differentiation from the rest of society are coordinated so that the administration is separated from other roles more than from politics, and from politics more than from the public. This is so because as the inordinate complexity of decision-making grows, the capacities of these decisions to be rationalized decreases.

The complexity in the system also varies with the extent of its internal differentiation. The distribution of complexity, both in extent and in determinateness, is directed toward the subsystems' functions and capacities for decision-making. That is why selective processes of communication, which first reduce complexity and then transfer it, must follow a definite order that is coordinated with the functions and capacities of the subsystems.

Communication that is supported by the official power structure normally flows from the voter, across political processes, through

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the administration, to the recipient of these decisions. It seems to legitimate a reflexive application of power to power. It orders the communication process of the system by further specifying and reducing the complexity of the total system. That is why less defined decision-making situations are preferred to more defined ones, and why the more unstable parts of the system guide the more stable ones.[32] The power of such a complex system, however, can only be actualized if each powerholder accepts decision premises set by others, and subordinates himself to the power of others. The greater and more indeterminate the complexity of his decision-making situation is, the greater his power. There thus arises a communication process in the opposite direction: the eventual recipient of the voters' decisions energetically makes his wishes known through interest groups, the bureaucrats work out the possible decisions for the political realm, and the politicians try to persuade the voters to give their support. In such a system, power must thus be exercised reflexively and reciprocally. That requires an exacting organization of the communication process, which gives rise in all the subsystems to power which is original, but capable of being influenced, and which separates decision-making situations so that reciprocally exercised power does not collide with itself. In this way the official exercise of power and the exercise of power in the opposite direction are held apart. The first has to be exercised legally on the basis of competencies, while the second has to be exercised informally on the basis of overburdening officials with complexity. Each direction of power is supported by different motives for its acceptance.[33]

VII. Internal Safeguards Against Risks

As the complexity of social systems increases, greater risks obviously have to be taken—risks that can no longer be warded off at the level of elementary face-to-face behavior or by reference to socially unambiguous dangers. Instead, in a very indefinite form "security" becomes problematic (Kaufmann 1970). This can even be observed under rather simple conditions—for example, when increasing complexity in the economy requires that even outsiders

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be given credit without being restricted by the diffuse and inescapable sanctions of a local community; or when trust and loyal support must be given to political rulers even if one is not related to them. The risk increases dramatically when a political system that is becoming autonomous demands that it be given sufficient time to act and total authority on decision-making. Such an authority can make almost anything possible since there are no longer powerful external controls that can keep decisions within the bounds of the desirable.

In contrast to the old problems of the capricious and despotic ruler, which could be solved through admonition, education, or assassination, the political philosophy and legal theory of early modern times focussed on the completely new problem of the uncanny arbitrariness of decision-making. This was a problem which, by being provided for structurally, was unavoidable. Not by accident, safeguards against this problem were at first still sought in law, in the limits of legitimacy, and in the establishment of controls. The fragility of these protective measures was obvious once law had become fully positive. Furthermore, it is questionable whether the problem has been fully grasped when it is viewed as the danger that rulers may misuse power. The risk that political support may fluctuate in an unforeseeable way is another aspect of this fundamental problem. In both cases it is the highly structured complexity of the political system that suggests the use of all-too-drastic forms of reduction. The indefinite abundance of possibilities suggests the use of simple means. The structural conditions of highly rational decision-making processes having variable premises are equally conditions that reinforce the insane use of power or unleash uncontrollable political mass movements.[34]

A theory of the political system can approach these phenomena with a new conceptual apparatus and, without denying them, can draw out some of their other aspects. In contrast to the viewpoint of action theory, this theory views the problem, not primarily as the danger that power will be exercised in a morally reprehensible way by too powerful a ruler, but as the need to create and maintain alternatives in the system, to stabilize great complexity. That is why for it the danger is not too much power, but too little power in the political system.[35]

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The political system of a highly differentiated society can no longer be understood as a means to an end and can no longer be regulated by rigid external guidance. In order to pursue its function it has become so differentiated from the rest of society, so autonomous and complex, that it can no longer base its stability on fixed foundations, practices, or values. It can become stable only by creating possibilities for change.[36] In this way, variability has become a condition of stability. Hence, it must be given structural guarantees. In other words, all social systems have the natural tendency to eliminate great complexity and insecurity by means of emotionally based identifications and fixations, personalized mechanisms of domination (based on personal connections and loyalty), tactical simplifications, and the construction of a historical tradition of generalized experiences. The structure of the political system must counteract this tendency.[37] Incentives for continually creating new alternatives must be built into the system in such a way that they survive individual goal-oriented actions and can regenerate themselves. The system has to have command over possibilities for change, without thereby eliminating these possibilities by viewing what is new as definitive. Paradoxically, beyond a certain level of complexity, security can be achieved only by the detour of maintaining insecurity.

Some of the typical institutions in modern political systems focus on just this paradoxical problem. It seems that, in order to solve it, they make use of procedures that presuppose the reflexivity of power, transmitting it to decision-making processes. The positivity of law, an orientation toward interests instead of truth, the pursuit of security through planning instead of tradition are some examples of this (Luhmann 1966a and chapter 5).

Law in a society becomes positive when mere legality comes to be recognized as legitimate—i.e., when law is heeded precisely because it has been made according to definite rules by competent decisions. In this way, arbitrariness about a central question of social life becomes institutionalized. This arbitrariness is bearable only if there are rules guiding how it is made concrete. Furthermore, as a continuing structure law must become so complex that it cannot be totally or capriciously changed; it can be changed only by alterations in the given structure—i.e., only on the basis of the

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status quo. Both of these features of law together lead to an institutionalization of procedures. Procedures are a particular kind of short-term subsystem which reduces complexity and legitimates decisions. The distinctive feature of this institution lies in the fact that it continues to create open and conflict-laden decision-making situations only as a temporary source of uncertainty; by means of this uncertainty it motivates both onlookers and participants to take part in the absorption of this uncertainty. Once sources of legitimation lying outside the political system can no longer be presupposed, legitimation must be achieved within the system itself.[38]

Parallel to this normative determination of norms we find a similar degree of arbitrariness institutionalized in the evaluation of values. Underlying this development is the fact that values as well as the pragmatic reduction of horizons of action have lost their capacity for being true.[39] Now values must themselves be evaluated and revaluated according to their function in orienting action.[40] In the political system truths are no longer at issue (although, naturally, firm everyday truths, such as that planes can fly or men must sleep, remain in use). Instead, it is interests that are at issue. Whoever still tries to advocate truths is making a mistake and is treated as doing so.

The evaluation of values can be institutionalized in various ways—for example, in one-party systems with an undogmatic ideology which, for a privileged circle of participants, serves as a basis for discussion and consensus; or in multiparty systems with a system of political competition that allows a subsystem to treat values instrumentally in terms of their results (especially electoral results). In any case, *opportunism* becomes essential for survival. Values can no longer by systematized by means of rigidly ordered priorities. They have to continually win validity and urgency from one situation to another, by being compared with how much other values have been realized. A sufficiently broad basis for this development depends on a sufficiently large number of values in the system finding advocates and on relative preferences changing sufficiently quickly. In this regard, too, such a high degree of complexity can be mastered only if there can be presupposed a status quo which may be improved but must not be made worse.[41] Fixing

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on a status quo appears as a new way of transmitting history, one which is favorable to planning. The shared assumption of consensus speaks on behalf of the status quo. To that extent, the status quo works as an institution: whoever wants change must assume the burden and risk of taking the initiative. In addition, the status quo can take the form of subjective rights, which can only be taken away in exchange for compensation. Or it can take the form of performance quotas that should be surpassed or at least adhered to. In both cases the past is used as a guideline for drafting the future, but not as a legitimizing symbol. History no longer poses obligations as a binding tradition that shows what is good and right. It is brought in only in its specific function as reduced complexity, as the elimination of other possibilities, since we do not have the means for calculating *ab ovo* what are better conditions (Wildavsky and Hammond 1965). Consequently history is accepted only on the condition that it can be revoked: all planning must indeed work on the basis of given conditions and needs, but it can change these to the extent that it can totally replace what exists.[42] Hence, all progress must take the form of substituting functional equivalents, exchanging given conditions for better ones.

The future no longer comes about automatically, but only piecemeal by means of decision-making processes. The security which once was offered by an undisturbable past must thus be drawn partially from the future and partially created by guarantees in the status quo. The belief in progress itself becomes an equivalent form of security, needing continual confirmation and finding it in the quantitative increase of something or other. Planning makes the future a part of the guaranteed status quo, with the result that a change of plans must be treated like a change of property.[43] To the individual the future is presented in the form of a career with typically expectable stages: he does not absolutely have to reach them, but they allow him to determine where he stands.[44]

It remains an open question whether all this (and much more) can congeal into a lasting attitude oriented toward a high degree of variability. Only to the extent that it can will social systems, and the political system in particular, be able to hold onto the high degree of complexity they have by virtue of differentiation from the

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rest of society, autonomy, functional specification, and increased selectivity.

VIII. Stabilization of Complexity

The previous analysis can be summarized in the following general proposition: the complexity of a political system must correspond to the complexity of the surrounding society. This correspondence can be a relation of equality only in the theoretical limiting case, where a political or administrative decision corresponds to each event in society. A demand for such a precise equality of complexity would do away with the differentiation of society and the political system, keeping both systems together at the level of simple, archaic relations. The Greek distinction between *oikos* and *polis* had already gone beyond that stage. And even the boldest ideas about politicizing all of society, as advocated in the Marxist-Leninist tradition or in many developing countries, are not striving for equal complexity. Instead, they are taking for granted a sparing and strategically narrow use of political decision-making power. We can thus assume that the complexity of the political system is less than that of society. This situation forces the political system to behave selectively in society, and indeed to develop its own style of selectivity. The political system compensates for its lesser degree of complexity through power.

We must presuppose this general relation between environment and system in order to grasp adequately what effects an increase of complexity in society has and what problems it poses for the political system. If our basic hypothesis mentioned above is correct, we can suppose that a significant increase in the complexity of society (especially through functional differentiation) will alter the structures and power relations of the political system, or that structures and power relations that are arrested in the political system will block such social development.

In simpler societies political domination, even when stabilized in clearly defined roles, gets by with relatively simple and directly motivated instruments of power—e.g., superior physical force, con-

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trol over part of the economic distribution process, the loyalty of a devoted subgroup, and belief in magical or religious sanctions. Domination is exercised only occasionally in the form of decisions and does not regulate the daily life of the population. If, however, the complexity of society increases (for whatever reasons) and if its need for binding decisions as well as their scope also increases, political domination can no longer be adequately based on invariant or barely variable constellations of motives. Instead, it must increase its own complexity, making it correspond to the complexity of society. The capacity of those traditional bases of power to be increased is inherently limited. Selections having a low degree of selectivity—orders to drive on the right side of the road, to hand over two cows, to attend an assembly—can be carried out by threats based on force or by appeals to loyalty. The consequences can be surveyed. When, on the other hand, the number of alternative possibilities increases so much that every affirmation excludes unsurveyably many alternatives, the opportunity for achieving a consensus about particular selections becomes extremely small unless powerholders allow themselves to be influenced in the preselection of alternatives. Under these conditions, the traditional instruments of power and the alternatives they permit in the case of noncompliance are shifted to an increasingly marginal position (though not for all that an unimportant one). For normal cases an unquestioning, indeed almost unmotivated, compliance with binding decisions must be guaranteed. That, too, is possible only if the complexity of the political system is great enough, only if the structure of the political system permits a sufficient number of possible alternatives, and the system thus is free to let itself be influenced.

This raises the problem of stabilizing great complexity in the political system. It is the question of how the system can be continually guaranteed to have a sufficiently indeterminate structure and a broad openness to other possibilities.[45] A high degree of tolerance for indeterminacy is, as a rule, difficult to institutionalize.[46] But that is especially so in this case, since the political system is under pressure to make decisions, to eliminate complexity continually, and to develop effective mechanisms to do this. It has the power to free itself of complexity and is supposed to use it only in a way that maintains complexity at the same time.

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In addition to putting up with structural indeterminacy, the political system must focus on easing structural variation. This leads to *destabilizing the structures* of political and administrative decision-making—both in law and in setting goals. If we measure the stability of structures by the magnitude of the forces which are in a position to alter them, we can recognize that the result is a lowering of the threshold at which they can be altered. Even rather small forces and normal activities, and not just outbreaks of crisis, will influence the development and alteration of structures. Small causes lead to large effects. It is obvious how dangerous such a destabilization is. It can be combined with order only when there also exists a guarantee that these small causes are either internal to the system or can be selected by criteria internal to the system. Otherwise any events in society could overthrow structures and lead to chaos. The easing of structural variation can only be introduced in conjunction with a greater autonomy and differentiation of the political system from the rest of society.

For theories of historical development, the construction of such an improbable system gives rise to significant difficulties. In no way can we think of seeing it in terms of a continuous and linear evolution, where it would be constructed brick by brick by assembling various territories and rights to authority and domination. The political system takes shape at a more abstract level, requiring reciprocal and circular relations of interdependence, so that establishing and exercising one part assumes that the same has already been done for the other parts and for the whole. This is equally true for the external relations of interdependence that the system sustains with its social environment.[47] In addition, in the development from traditional forms of political domination to the modern political system there lies a threshold which, when crossed, leads to a radical change in the structure of the political system. All this suggests a hypothesis which—given our present state of knowledge—can only be formulated speculatively: the complexity of a particular kind of political system cannot necessarily be stabilized at any degree whatever, and thus it cannot develop continuously in a stepwise manner. It depends on too many variables, which can be coordinated only in particular circumstances. Once a certain level of development has been reached, the stability of the previous

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form of political domination disappears. A regression is then likely.[48] Only infrequent constellations of factors can help to cross this threshold, since a pronounced differentiation from the rest of society, autonomy, functional specification, indeterminacy of structure (especially the positivization of law, the interchangeability of powerholders, and the mobilization of political support), and significant increases in power are now required. Each of these requirements depends on the meeting of rather complex conditions. As history shows, this step in development is not impossible, but improbable.[49] Among other things, it depends on interim solutions remaining sufficiently stable and able to perform the function of easing the transition.[50] In the long run, security can be regained and stabilized without overwhelming tension only if complexity itself becomes a stabilizing factor.

In the course of this essay, I have alluded in passing to this possibility in a number of ways—with the idea that the more unstable parts of the system can regulate the more stable ones, and the idea that an opportunistic approach to the satisfaction of values promises stability to the extent that it can fulfill sufficiently many conflicting values by changing preferences and burdens sufficiently quickly. Balancing the dominant path of communication with the reverse path in the power-circuits of the system depends on a high level of complexity's having been distributed to separate situations. The problem of stabilizing indifference and arbitrariness in the relations among subsystems belongs here, along with the problem of learning attitudes toward roles that are more favorable to complexity. The ability to absorb social conflicts also strengthens the system, with the help of complexity. We can summarize all of this in the idea that more complex political systems have a better chance for adapting to an increasinglv more complex environment. And thus they have better prospects for maintaining their complexity.

A theory of the political system that is needed to handle problems of this kind cannot base its conceptual framework on a reconstruction of the traditional, ethical philosophy of political society. Nor can it base its conceptual framework on a formal, political theory of institutions, focusing for example on various forms and organs of the state. A theory of the political system can do justice to the

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complexity of its subject matter only if it reaches a level of theoretical abstraction that is still not customary today. Systems theory is still unable to offer an elaborate and tested framework for this goal. But it can offer so many relatively consistent suggestions that its further elaboration seems worthwhile.

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8

The Political Code

"Progressive" and "Conservative"

The language of politics loves contrasts. The distinction between friends and enemies is essential to its structure. This dichotomy must not, however, be identified with the structure of politics *tout court*. Its connotations are too concrete and it does not provide enough information to define real political issues. For the pursuit of interests (in all their complex interrelations) it would be counterproductive to label as an enemy everyone who is different; for example, to consider all nonfarmers as enemies of agriculture. Furthermore, we must occasionally be able to switch friends and enemies without endangering our own identity or political existence. It thus becomes convenient, in tandem with the increasing complexity and especially with the increasing interdependence of the various contexts of political action, to replace this *social* schematism of friend and enemy with a *temporal* schematism. In modern times, the distinction between "progressive" and "conservative" appears to assume this function of a primary political schematism.

We can observe the tags "conservative" and "progressive" employed in a wide variety of different situations. They are applied to ideologies, individuals, pressure groups, political parties, proposals, platforms, opinions, purported opinions, and so forth. There are no specific restrictions on where such labels may be placarded within the general field of the politically relevant. They can, of course, be directly imputed. But they can also be insinuated indirectly. Whoever is in favor of something which might plausibly be characterized as "authority" or "domination" is conservative. Whoever wants to be "emancipated"—especially if he wants to foist "emancipation" on others—is progressive. Representatives of monopoly capitalism appear to be conservative. Representatives of (Soviet-style) capital monopolism consider themselves progressive. This is not immediately convincing. Nevertheless, there may be good reasons for a political dualism (necessarily introduced on the most abstract level and, thus, in a very formal way) to be equipped with its own code words. Such words would give it, so to speak, a hermeneutical dimension. In fact, the catalogue of slogans provided by history is conveniently available for this task. Here we find assembled whatever is so old that it no longer needs to be explained.

Given this situation, it is advisable from the start to disregard ideologies, which simulate or feign "rational foundations," while actually classifying themselves as progressive or conservative.[1] The meaning and function of such a dichotomy, therefore, must be discussed at a higher level of abstraction, at a level where we can safely ignore questions concerning the rightness or wrongness of particular ideological positions.

I

A basis for this more abstract level of discussion is offered by the analysis that systems theory gives of the concept and function of a "code." The concept of a code is frequently used in an unsystematic way and with a mere semblance of technical precision.[2] Not every series of symbols or instructions which operate as a structure for the processing of information is a code in the strict sense. We cannot even be satisfied with the additional proviso that such symbols must, through the way they are arranged, refer to a reality outside themselves. Such a concept of "code," though a commonplace in linguistics, is on the one hand too general for our purposes, and on the other hand it demands what are for us irrelevant specifications when it is applied.[3] As a consequence, we shall not here adopt the specifically linguistic concept of a code. Instead, we shall try to employ a vocabulary for talking about codes which has become fruitful in biogenetics. We shall elaborate it in a specific direction, however, through an analysis of the function of binary schematizations.

A code, accordingly, is a structure with specific characteristics: it has a special capacity for guiding selections. It is able to locate a counterpart for each relevant item that falls within its domain.

We can clarify the way a code functions by recalling the special sort of code that originally made the concept fashionable: the one used for sending messages. Above and beyond this technically special case, however, the principle of assigning a counterpart to every item in a given field has a more general significance for the structure of complex systems. The morphology of simple organisms, for example, already requires it. Apart from code failures or mutations, this principle makes possible a strict coordination between mechanisms for genetic reproduction and the elementary structure of organisms. This coordination, in turn, makes organic evolution possible.[4] Now, for meaning-generating systems, language is the primary code. Language can assume so central a function not merely because it consists of symbolically generalized signs, but also because it carries within it the irrepressible possibility of negation.

The possibility of negation develops on the basis of prelinguistic capacities for action and communication. Language, once it has incorporated this potential for negation (Schmidt 1973, p. 178ff), becomes a code in the proposed sense, and can thereafter be employed in an extraordinarily flexible manner. Negation does not make possible a duplication of the entire stock of signs, as has been shown by the linguistic discussion about Harald Weinrich's concept of universally applicable "dual paradigms" (Weinrich 1967, 1975). What negation does make possible, however, is a duplication of the essential *modes* of employing signs. As a result, such modes are made available in both positive and negative versions. To the extent that possibilities of negation exist, every utterance (including negations) can be replicated, so that its meaning can be put to contrary use. The coordination of individual choices made by participants acting and experiencing in diverse ways is essential to all social situations. Duplication rules based on negation must be readily available if such situations are to be constituted and reproduced. The very form of language as a binary code prevents the possibility that diverse choices will be canceled by consensus. This ever-present possibility serves as a foundation for the structure of complex systems and to maintain their differentiated contact with their environments. The linguistic code guarantees that this chance of "choosing otherwise" remains a real one. In fact, without the linguistic code's built-in potential for negation, social evolution would be impossible: It would lack a suitable mechanism for introducing variation and change.

The linguistic code supplements the elementary possibility of sending messages with the possibility for negating them. As a result, further codes are required for regulating the acceptance or rejection of doubtful linguistic communications. Such codes are developed in relation to the generalized media of communication and each one is aligned with a distinct functional domain of society. For the economy, there is the code of owning and not owning property; for the exercise of political power, there is a code which distinguishes right from wrong and justice from injustice; and for science, there is the binary code of logic. Unlike the general linguistic code, these special "media codes" are schemes with built-in preferences.[5] We find affiliated with each code rules for processing information as well as rules for valuing and devaluing. In each case, the code in question contains rules for exclusion as well as rules for introducing a fundamental symmetry between "yesses" and "noes." These rules may well be implausible both psychologically and for the everyday life of society.[6] Nevertheless, they have been successfully institutionalized within discrete subsystems. The historical preconditions for the emergence of such codes (which are ancillary to language) require a thorough examination. Very probably, the initial emergence of "media codes" was provoked by the development of writing, especially of alphabetic writing (Goody and Watt 1963). For our purposes, this can be left undecided. Interesting in relation to our theme of the political code is whatever insight we can cull from these examples about the operating conditions of codes in general.

The functioning of such a code is closely bound up with evolution. Codes are essential for regulating the development of self-reproducing and self-substituting orders. An order can be considered self-substituting when it cannot be replaced by another kind of order, but can only be transformed and developed further. Thus, society cannot be replaced by other types of system, for instance, by machines or organisms. Likewise, science cannot be replaced by economic activity, but only by other forms of truth seeking. Self-substituting orders are only possible with the help of special mechanisms for coordinating continuity and discontinuity. The counterpart or "other" must be sought out and developed on the basis of what is already given. The most general expression of this requirement is found in codified rules for duplication.

At first glance, this looks like senseless reduplication: tiny mechanisms of genetic reproduction, programmed to repeat the same process endlessly, swell up into large organisms, which die quickly thereafter. The egg creates a chicken in order to produce more eggs. Language is not satisfied with a simple labeling of things. Thus, insofar as contexts of communication require it, language also makes negative copies available. Science not only establishes what is true, but also (in the same breath) what is false. Double-entry bookkeeping requires that every business transaction be registered by two entries. Likewise, political issues present themselves in both a progressive and a conservative version. There must be some reason why such prodigality is worth it.

Whatever specific items are coupled by a code, the code form itself makes it possible, within a prescribed area of relevance, to assign a *specific* counterpart to every *single* item. If law is being discussed, for example, the relevant code allows us to talk about both legal and illegal behavior. A code, in other words, makes its duplication mechanism available in both a *general* and a *specific* manner. This occurs without any limitations being imposed upon the content of its application, and with all possibilities for further specification being left open. Thus, mechanisms for processing information in yet unknown situations are granted *in abstracto* a capacity for making precise and influential selections.

Whenever such codes are installed as system structures, they produce—through their counterpart-assigning procedure—an even-handed distribution of the paired elements, as a result of which systems deviate markedly from their environments. For the legal system, regardless of how legal and illegal behavior are distributed in its social environment, legality itself is the mirror image of illegality. In every trial, one side is declared right, the other side wrong, *without any regard to the general social distribution or frequency of right and wrong behavior.*[7] Similarly, accounting based on double-entry bookkeeping becomes independent of the social distribution of property. As systems "process" information according to universal and specific criteria, they produce and continuously reproduce this "equitable" distribution of coupled items. From this there follow consequences for processes internal to a system as well as for its environment.

For internal processes, such dyadic paradigms ease the transition from one item to its counterpart—especially when it is a question of opposites. If one person owns property and the other does not, it requires little imagination to conceive of them in the reverse circumstances. In the case of truth, "doubt" is always an obvious possibility. Once cognitive processes are schematized according to a binary code, in fact, all knowledge must include specifiable conditions for possible refutation. The growth of knowledge becomes "dialectical" (so says Bachelard), in the sense that progress in knowledge is guided by the *negation* of earlier theoretical attempts, while whatever is valuable in superseded theories (established truths or falsehoods) is preserved.[8] Without already guaranteeing the possibility of a decision or justifying fundamental decisions, a binary code will reduce the surfeit of meaning in such a way as to make additional criteria for decision-making necessary and possible. Thus, the codes of property and double-entry accounting prepared the way for the optimalization of profit.

The schematization of the *transition* to counterparts is also illustrated by the fact that a code does not have to be a rule for establishing consensus. It does not have to schematize the difference between consensus and disagreement. A "consensus theory of truth" must insist on consensus not only about truths but also about falsehoods.[9] As a consequence, such a theory cannot employ consensus exclusively as a criterion of truth. Dual schematisms, moreover, allow consensus to be upset. This forms the basis for facilitating operations in the social dimension. The same argument, incidentally, applies to the old idea that societies can be "integrated" by consensus about values. Consensus must also refer to disvalues and to the relation between disvalues and values. Thus, it must refer to *both* parts of the code in question and to the conditions for performing disjunctive operations.[10]

A code establishes and stabilizes a system-specific perspective on the environment and thereby permits abstraction. The lawyer or judge, for example, *sees* concrete reality in the form of "cases." These, in turn, already raise the question of right or wrong, legality or illegality. "Cases" imply the possibility of repeating decisions or verdicts.[11] Such an abstraction is accomplished by thoroughly exploring the environment in search of specific counterparts—apropos an affirmation of right, for example, one might search for a wrong. The code contains, so to speak, an implicit lure or enticement toward supplementation with a counterpart. Depending on the type of system (and the instruments it has available), a code prestructures the perception of choices, the way of posing questions, incentives to explore, preferences, and so forth. A code always does this by associating a counterpart with whatever is given. The system, to use Bachelard's terms, always seeks the *inconnu précis* (1962, p. 37). As a result, the environment appears contingent for the system.

Furthermore, the system defines for itself a prescribed area for future action. Thus, it achieves what decision theory calls independence from irrelevant alternatives (Luce 1959, p. 9).

Finally, we should comment briefly on a code's own degree of abstraction. Every code enforces alternatives by excluding other possibilities. This is why it remains controvertible. One can escape its clutches simply by turning it into a topic of discussion, for example, by asking: is a trial worth it from a financial point of view or from a human point of view?[12] Given this possibility for escape, a code's ability to sustain itself for the further processing of information is a problem that finds its solution in the form of an abstract disjunction. The code does not thereby become immune to reflection, but only relatively well sheltered. Contesting the disjunction becomes difficult because an interest in doing so (in contrast to a simple interest in truth or property) cannot be formulated or made intelligible very easily.[13] A similar protective function is exercised by the self-evidence of code-terminology which allows the basic unity of the disjunction to remain latent. Thus, when someone is trying to increase his own or someone else's property, he normally does not bear in mind that he is simultaneously increasing the nonproperty of others. Indeed, such ignorance may well be a necessary condition for his readiness to act.

II

These sketches of the concept and the function of a code must suffice as a preliminary to asking if politics has its own code and, if so, what it is. This question should not be understood in Carl Schmitt's sense, as a question about the "essence" of the political (1963). Likewise, it should not be posed ahistorically for all times and all societies. On the contrary, the concept of a code should sensitize us to questions about the context in which a code originates and the preconditions for its operations in diverse subsystems of society. Consequently, there is no need to prove the existence or nonexistence of a political code. The only significant questions are: Which elementary schematism assumes the function of a code within the political sphere? To what extent? And what problems ensue from this?

The political code, it should be added, is not a "political formula" in the sense proposed by Gaetano Mosca (1939, pp. 70–72). It is not a principle of legitimacy, but rather a rule of growth. It is not a value but a disjunction.

To the extent that there was a political code in premodern societies, law assumed this function. The exercise of political power was judged according to whether or not it conformed to law. Inversely, political development led to greater autonomy in the defining of legal goals and more flexibility in the instruments for generalizing law and raising it to higher levels. As soon as politics took over legislative functions, a higher-order legal level developed: divine law, religiously based morality and natural law.[14] At the same time, counterpart "illegal" levels or diverse "levels of contrast"[15] emerged within the legal system. These, in turn, normatively structured the area within which political action was possible. The functional expansion of politics entailed, first of all, an expansion of the legal code (which politics always presupposes). This occurred without the legal codification of politics as such being called into question. Moreover, it was characteristically independent of the professional and technical needs of juristic practice itself. Especially in early modern times—the case of Roman Law is more complex—"natural law" turned out to be a part of the science of politics rather than of jurisprudence (in the sense of a doctrine closely associated with daily legal practice). This, of course, did not exclude an exchange of citations, principles, and arguments.

Two developments eventually eclipsed this situation. Both are connected to the emergence of bourgeois society in the modern sense. This new type of society attained a functional differentiation of systems on a gradually more world-wide basis and to a hitherto unrivaled degree. Indeed, bourgeois society became so complex that its most important processes had to be articulated in the temporal dimension: through a finely tuned sequence of phases, through chronologically fixed dates and deadlines, through conditions for synchronization, through holding open future possibilities for unforeseeable cases and so on. These sociostructural changes affected the political code from two angles. They removed its "foundation" in law and at the same time they made politics more independent and structurally autonomous.

The *first* development was that the legal system was placed on a fully positive basis. That is to say, the legal system began to view *decisions* as the ultimate foundation for law (Luhmann 1970d; 1972a, 1:190ff). The temporalization of complexity, moreover, made it difficult for social "authorities" to be normatively convincing—neither in the field of single legal axioms themselves, nor in the domain of systematic jurisprudence, nor presumably in the demands and expectations of daily life (Luhmann 1974b). Because of an increasing fluctuation of the relevant contexts it became less meaningful to bridge time by counterfactually (and stubbornly) holding onto supposedly "justified" expectations. An obstinate adherence to norms became irrational once social reality could be expected to defy expectations (Forrester 1971). Such an engagement would have (in the course of time) maneuvered individuals out of touch with reality. And that would certainly not have been reasonable politically.

The *second* (and parallel) development was that the internal organization of politics became more complex. The rift between politics and administration, already prefigured in archaic societies (M. G. Smith 1956; 1960), became wider to the extent that large numbers of decisions had to be channeled through programs, while their execution posed increasing professional and organizational demands. This differentiation suggested in turn the development of diverse criteria for politics, and for administration. Within the framework of the political system, serving to produce collectively binding decisions, there emerged (in a heightened sense) a "political" subsystem. This subsystem performed, so to speak, a political function for the political system. Moreover, it developed its own organizational substratum in the form of political parties.

That the political system is itself governed by its own political subsystem is an expression of the high degree of separateness or structural autonomy of the political system itself. This system is now integrated into society only by communication, and not through roles or traditional strata. Politics thus loses its previous foundation in ascriptively fixed class differences—differences once experienced as "natural" and to this extent as part of a "natural law" horizon for prebourgeois politics.[16] The political system's relation to its social environment, therefore, involves selective variation on both sides. Political processes require new foundations both in their relation to the social environment and to the internal governance of the political system through the decision programs set down for the bureaucracy. In this specific evolutionary and historical situation, the question about the code of politics is posed once again.

III

It is understandable that initial reactions to the collapse of the old world and to the emergence in bourgeois society of new patterns for combining constraints with freedoms were highly irrational: Treitschke's "Aristotelian" concept of politics (Riedel 1963); the interpretation of the distinction between bureaucracy and politics as well as of that between science and politics according to the classificatory schema of rationality versus irrationality (Schaeffle 1897; Mannheim 1936); Carl Schmitt's friend/enemy schematism; and (topical today) the recombination of politics with rationality in the remote and unattainable goals of young people are all provisional and literary conceptions without lavish reference to reality. The concept of a code, by contrast, shifts the form of the question. It provides us with a new sort of model for guiding research, one no longer defined by concepts like "essence," "value," or "goal" (without, of course, denying that such concepts occur as events in social reality). The idea of a code guarantees that various distinct phenomena can be analyzed within a single framework.

Today, the division between progressive and conservative attitudes is the candidate best suited to inherit the function of a political code. It certainly represents the most widespread endeavor at political dichotomization and thus at the transformation of issues into problems (to the solution of which power relations and majorities can contribute). To be sure, all of politics does not have to stand in intimate relation to the progressive/conservative code. Political life often remains at the level of occasions and direct reactions to them, or at the level of interests. Interests, so to speak, are the "holy relics" of the political system: because of them, we do *not* always have to invoke the highest authority or endeavor to satisfy "the whole." The dyadic political code, however, makes it possible to generalize interests when the need arises. It does this by aligning particular interests either with the forces of progress or with the features of the existing social order most worthy of being preserved. Inferences are then drawn in which the current political issue and the particular interest in question constitute only minor elements. They are sustained solely through the chain: whoever wants a constitutional state must also desire independence for officialdom, lifetime appointments, the occupying of important offices by lawyers and so on. Whoever wants to bring about racial equality must also desire intervention in private profit-seeking, and in private or neighborhood spheres of life, must also favor lowering standards in the school system, and must likewise agree to influence the real estate market, the price of land, and the choice of individual residence.[17] The readiness to embrace such consequences cannot be produced by conscientiously weighing the alternatives, or by exhaustively calculating means versus ends. The relevant aspects of the social order are much too complex for such reckoning. Instead, in the face of a complex order, willingness to accept such concatenations of linked consequences is developed through a "flip-flop" option in the political code: we strike either a progressive or a conservative posture. In this way, interests allow themselves to be transformed and generalized. They become noteworthy even for those not immediately concerned. Such a generalization is politically more effective, to the extent that it is not achieved through abstract consensus about values or commonly accepted euphemisms. Its effectiveness, indeed, depends on the fact that it is achieved with the help of a code which is related to specific aspects of the existent order. Thus, the generalization of interests can be presented as a highly controversial question or as a burning political issue.

The supporting foundation for this aptitude of the binary political code lies precisely in the place where the legal code reaches its limits: in the application of a schema for temporal differentiation. The code starts from the premise (based on modern experiences of time and history) that time is simultaneously a condition for the possibility of continuity and for the possibility of discontinuity.[18] Time thus contains no inherent preference for either a conservative or a progressive attitude toward history. Politically speaking, time is impartial. As a result, it can serve as a foundation for the political code. Indeed, the formal characteristics of this code can be traced to an abstraction based on our ordinary consciousness of time (containing the potential for continuity/discontinuity) and to a temporalization of all reality—to changes in form that have powerfully impressed themselves on the ordinary state of consciousness in bourgeois society since the French Revolution.

At the same time, the universalism of this code is guaranteed. It can divide every possible political issue into a progressive and conservative version. Such issues, on whatever basis and for whatever reasons they arise in political processes (Luhmann 1971, pp. 9–34), can be dichotomized as soon as they leave the wings and step out on stage. If a viewpoint is progressive, and that seems to be the case most of the time, it provokes a conservative counterposition. In reaction to broad administrative reforms on a regional basis, local customs are suddenly discovered, along with the quaint old town hall and the warmth of communal togetherness. At the very least, such nostalgic predilections are imputed to others.[19] In reaction to political moves of a more preservation-minded sort (one thinks of support for agriculture or for the middle classes), progressive goals are discovered: in this case, rationalization. These reflex actions are, first of all, intrinsic features of political issues, "reality constructions" of the political process. Their degree of realism, however, varies enormously.[20] In the case of a Norwegian law about domestic servants, Vilhelm Aubert observed "how, with the help of legislation, a flight of fantasy can sometimes take place, whereby a situation is magically created in which suddenly there are (once again) a sufficient number of domestic servants." (This procedure recalls "an investigation of a colonial administration which was bringing legal action against a group of 'leopard men' in West Africa who apparently did not even exist."[21]) The law in question was concerned with the improvement of the social condition of employed servants. The propelling force behind the law, by contrast, was the conflict between progressive and conservative parliamentary forces.

The political process is governed on the basis of politically produced images—images which politics validates periodically by exploring its milieu and by asking experts. This can be traced to the structural autonomy of politics. The political process's need for myths, for sly innuendo, and for information are all structured by its double codification, and not directly by its social environment. No matter where the social impulses come from, and no matter whether they tend toward preservation in the face of threats or toward expansion and innovation, the code always conjures up an appropriate counterpart and thus brings about a new distribution of social chances for continuity or discontinuity. In a society which is prone to be extremely progressive, which is dynamic, glutted with alternatives and addicted to growth, a politics based on the distinction between progressive and conservative will appear to block the natural flow of things, to be conservative and anti-reform. Politics will convey this impression even if it only applies the code in a schematic (or impartially descriptive) way and contains no built-in preference for the conservative point of view.

IV

Negations in general and dyadic codes in particular depend on a preunderstanding of the *word catalogue* (or repertoire) appropriate in each context. When a doctor decides that his patient is not suffering from a case of influenza, he can only go on to consider what particular ailment (if any) the patient has—and not, for example, the six-cylinder engine or the Gross National Product. For linguists, dual paradigms themselves appear as extreme cases of word catalogues with only two elements (Weinrich 1967, p. 2213). It is better at the outset for us to distinguish between code structures and language so that we shall be able to consider combination problems on this basis. We can thus take it as settled that every codification in linguistic as well as in language-dependent domains presupposes supplementary restrictions on the affiliated word catalogue. The abstract yes/no code of language does not yield meaning. Indeed, the application of this highly general code requires a previous reduction in the complexity of what is linguistically possible. Only in this way can the choices imposed by further utterances be effectively guaranteed. This question arises: If it isn't influenza, what is it? It must be answerable after a limited process of inquiry.

These general reflections make it possible to define more accurately the relations between ideology and the political code. Ideologies serve as *the word catalogue of the political code.* Thus, ideologies regulate code-like processes of assigning counterparts in specific directions. Consider, for instance, the word catalogue which includes "capital," "monopoly," "domination," "private ownership," "democracy," "progress," "emancipation," "class," "crisis," and so forth. These words can be combined in numerous ways—but not arbitrarily or at random (we cannot plausibly speak of an emancipation of capital). With the help of such concatenations of words, situations can be studied more closely, implications can be communicated, and feelings can be evoked. *Within* the bipartite word catalogue, the code itself is reproduced in a twofold way as an antagonism. Thus, progressives have words for conservatism and conservatives have words for progressivism, without the antagonism itself being concealed through superimposition or assimilations.[22]

This analysis has not provided a satisfactory definition of ideology; it presupposes one. And it does not provide an analysis of the origin of single entries in the word catalogue such as we expect from the "history of ideas." It does, however, clarify why ideologies are secondary or derivative achievements, signaling a contrapuntal response. It also explains that this is true for progressive and conservative ideologies alike.[23] One could, therefore, use "ideologization" to denote the process whereby catalogues of words and concepts are captured by the magnetic field of the political code and assume its reduplication and counterpart-assigning functions. Only in this way does the naïve continuation of the tradition come to be viewed as a value and as a justification for further continuity.

V

In order to clarify the foregoing analyses, it will be helpful to give an example of the way the political code operates in a specific case: in the planning of Civil Service reform in the Federal Republic of Germany. This is a technically advanced, unsurveyable, and at the same time politically explosive and momentous affair—one need only think about the problem of civil servant strikes. In this example we can clearly observe how a highly complex domain (already partitioned into bosses, administrative levels, status groups, career patterns, career groups, the regulations of wages and health care, duties, rights and so forth) is schematized in the political process through the dual paradigm of politics.

First the essential background must be recalled. In December 1970, following initial discussions in the period of the "grand coalition," the Federal government (on the initiation of the Bundestag) established a Study Commission for the Reform of the Civil Service, which filed its report in May 1973.[24] The Commission was conceived of as a panel of experts. The concept of expertise, however, was politically tinged. Experts, for example, were selected in hopes of providing a "representative" sample (reflecting parties, interest groups, the economy, and science as well as bureaucracy on the federal, regional, and local levels). Moreover, the Commission was confronted at the outset with a political situation. The German Federation of Labor (*Deutsche Gewerkschaftsbund*) had already published its "principles for a reform of the Civil Service Law" in September 1970.[25] Moreover, discussion in the public law symposium of the German Lawyer's Conference on September 23 and 24, 1970, had already produced corresponding battlefronts.[26] In terms of content, the question was whether a new, rewritten Civil Service Law should follow the traditional Civil Service Law or instead the traditional employment law (which includes the right to strike and the regulation of salaries through collective bargaining). Adherence to the first tradition was deemed conservative, and adherence to the second progressive.

The Commission's recommendations landed directly in this dichotomous magnetic field when, at the very outset, it decided whom to ask for advisory reports and to whom research tasks should be assigned. Only the delicate balancing acts necessary here can explain the astonishing number of constitutional, legal, and political "reports" that were requested. Thereafter, in questions that appeared important (legal versus collective-bargaining forms of wage regulation, the right to strike, health care through the Civil Service supervisor or through the general insurance plan), there were possible progressive (operating with the ideology of society) and conservative (operating with the ideology of the State) positions. It was impossible to heal this breach. To do so would scarcely have been reasonable from a political standpoint in any case. The politically encoded stalemate continued, enriched by arguments, up through the final vote.

One can lament this disagreement. Or one can breathe a sigh of relief because the professional Civil Service was narrowly saved by ten votes against nine. Or one can launch politically more energetic attacks in order to whittle that slender majority down to a minority.[27] The significant question to ask here is if, in this case (and perhaps in many other cases), reforms were shipwrecked by the political code. To answer this question we must examine more closely how the dual paradigm of politics lures a highly complex object domain (with many problems and multiple possibilities for development) into its sphere of influence. Formulated differently and more drastically: Why must we fight right now, precisely about these issues and in this way? What determines our choice?

It is obvious that the huge Civil Service system, built up little by little during the course of quite distinct epochs, offers points for reform in a society which is rapidly changing both economically and politically. Indeed, the Study Commission considered a number of different possibilities. One can think of reforms in the standards governing transfers of personnel, reforms in the facilities and content of education, reforms in measuring techniques, in planning techniques, as well as in collecting and learning from experiences. All of these, however, would be reforms for a historically given, legally preconstituted body of personnel. It is this stubborn historicity of "the given" which prohibits a purely technical procedure for making reforms and thus makes the political code relevant. We can find further evidence for this claim by examining the structure of the Civil Service.

Today's Civil Service is split into two status groups—one of officials, the other of salaried employees. The original *raison d'être* of this differentiation (it permitted simultaneously a recruitment into open-ended careers for high-ranking functions and a recruitment into fixed positions for other activities) has now been lost (Hartfiel et al. 1964; Ronneberger and Rödel 1971, pp. 88ff; Ellwein and Zoll 1973, pp. 157ff). What remains is an unjustifiable disparity of legal status, including amount of money earned (Menzel 1969), as well as undue variations in the criteria for job mobility and in the actual chances for such mobility (Luhmann and Mayntz 1973, pp. 170, 181f). In the area of mobility, indeed, there are hopeful bases for reforms and also legal prohibitions, which play a pivotal role in political intrusions into the processes of reform. A thoroughgoing reform of the Civil Service, grounded empirically in facts and consequences, must gain control over the regulation of movements in personnel (recruitment and assignment) in order to coordinate tasks and performances as well as demands and achievements. That, however, presupposes the elimination of all obstructions to job mobility which are not a matter of function or capacity. It requires, in other words, a unification of the Civil Service Law. This in turn produces (and here politicization sets in) the problem of obsolete laws surviving under new legal conditions. Individual rights, of course, can be sheltered in the reform by a protection clause and, thus, counterstructurally salvaged. This is not possible, however, with respect to the legal positions upon which are erected the power positions of status-group interest coalitions. These are (1) the competence to determine wages and (2) the right to strike. Thus, the political issue of reform culminates in these two questions. It passes for progressive (again for purely historical reasons) to be in favor both of the right to strike and of the participation of civil servant associations in collective bargaining; and it passes for conservative to be against these things, even though *both* solutions aim at conserving and building upon preexisting legal precedents.

Such an overworked problem easily becomes politically undecidable. In such circumstances, distorting the issue of reform with the help of the political code can halt the reform itself or at least sidetrack it. What remains then is the chance for small pragmatic improvements, planned and executed in the obscurity of ministerial bureaucracies, with a conscientious avoidance of those pathways where the large political sleeping dogs might be awakened. Under the pressure of its own code, the political process will tend to identify the dual paradigm of progressive/conservative with that of reform/no-reform. In this way, it employs the dichotomy to track down guilty parties on whom the obstruction of reform might be blamed. The disjunction inherent in the code makes reform politically difficult, if not impossible. Nevertheless, the charge of success or failure is formulated in terms of the code. This use of the code to attribute success or failure in reform rounds out its universal applicability. With the political code we can grab hold of all political issues and explain everything. The only thing we cannot do is analyze the code itself. From a logical point of view, attributing responsibility to the code itself would be (within this system) the closest thing possible to a sin against the Holy Ghost.

VI

After this brief excursion into an area of application, further questions can be asked about the political code. These questions concern the conditions under which the code is employed. It has become habitual (on the highest structural level of politics within the political system) to see things in terms of this dual paradigm and to think and speak in its dyadic idiom. Accordingly, we must ask what consequences this dual schematism has when it is translated into concrete decision-making processes. And most important of all: what demands does the code put on decision-making bodies and on the criteria according to which their decisions are made?

At the code's level of abstraction, convincing decision criteria have yet to be formulated and generally accepted. That would require a binary schematism with a built-in preference (such as we find, for instance, in truth/falsehood, legal/illegal, property/nonproperty). It would also produce secondary or derivative problems, such as those discussed above under the rubric "theodicy." This, in turn, would require an introduction of symmetry, so that the nonexistence of the bad would be considered *eo ipso* good.[28] The questionability—especially the political questionability—of such "elimination rules" is quite obvious. In any case, they cannot be successfully combined with the progressive/conservative schema. Only very inexperienced and incompetent hands could employ this schema as if the mere existence of what exists were already an error. In sum, there are no criteria for the maximization of progressiveness. Compromises can be imagined in which conservativism would contribute to maximizing progress. Examples might refer to Pareto-optimal progress or to a demand for the substitution of functional equivalents whenever change occurs. As we know from decision theory, however, the relative importance of goals on the one hand and side-conditions on the other can be rapidly inverted. The more variables one must keep in mind, the more important side-constraints become. A conservative can even say with Herbert Simon (1964, p. 6): "If you allow me to determine the constraints, I don't care who selects the optimization criterion." The progressive or conservative choice of direction can be effectively subverted through imposed side-conditions, while a progressive or conservative result cannot be foreseen on the basis of rational decision-making criteria alone.

From this impossibility of determining decision criteria adequate to the temporal or past/future structure of the code, great benefit accrues to the typical politician's one-dimensional striving after "growth." It emboldens his inherent tendency to view every added increment beyond the recognized standard as a choiceworthy goal. Because there are many paths for growth, however, the burden of decision is shifted from abstract criteria for rational choice to concrete deliberative agencies which must eventually decide.

As far as these deliberative bodies are concerned, we can assume that the political code is interrelated with the procedural principle of majority rule. We know that the majority principle is ill-adapted to the aggregation of preferences (Buchanan and Tullock 1962; Ward 1961). Rather than yielding such an aggregation, majority rule replaces it. This requires an institutional "background consensus," as well as (something thus far less frequently noted) preparatory schematisms in the political process. The binary or pro/con schematization of the vote must have its way prepaved. It must "connect" with the political issue to be decided upon. Similarly, the way voting choices are posed and specific aspects of the main issue highlighted must be kept visible within preparatory political discussions, and in the formation of public opinion and power alliances. This is achieved by the codification of politics and the enrichment of this codification through substantive arguments. The schematization of politics according to the dual paradigm of progressive or conservative solutions to problems also requires an appropriately "formal" routine for bringing procedures to a close. To be sure, the political code need not be applied in all cases nor continuously cited. To the extent that it defines the development of issues, however, the political code erodes (through dichotomization) the possibility of accord or compromise, as does the legal code.

Thus, in controversial matters, there are chances for strategic choice in politics just as there are in law. We may seek agreement on the basis of the widest possible shared consensus *or* we may at the outset apply the dyadic code of politics, and then appeal to voting according to the principle of majority rule. It is not very well known which factors typically govern this particular option.[29] For appraising the relevance of the political code, however, the alternative itself is an important indicator. To the extent that the path of schematization is chosen, codification and the majority principle work hand in hand. As our analysis of the problems of Civil Service reform was meant to show, an act of political power is required at this point. And it cannot be authorized through the formally available principle of majority rule.

VII

The abstract content of the political code is continuity and discontinuity. As a schema institutionalized with this subject matter, the political code allows the possibility of choosing between continuity and discontinuity without instituting a fixed preference for one or the other. This may well be a stimulus for further reflection on the function of binary schemes. Here, at least, there are none of the obstacles to such reflection which lie in the clear preferences *within* codes—for instance in preferences for truth, justice, and property.

Given such possibilities, it is obvious that the political code too is susceptible to a (not further legitimated) incorporation of preferences. Progressive attitudes are frequently, and today increasingly, bolstered by moralistic pretensions about consensus. Conversely, conservatism or the endeavor to stabilize political authority or strengthen relations of domination redound to an individual's discredit. Are these examples of the naïveté which can be expected in the context of morality? Or are they symptoms of degeneration in the political code? It may be that both are the case and, indeed, that the two are interconnected.

Moral norms are intimately related to the conditions under which individuals can reciprocally esteem one another. As a result, the normative regulation of behavior has a general social relevance. Even when norms are anchored by reference to certain accomplishments in discrete functional subsystems, they reach beyond these circumscribed domains and symbolize intersubjectively sharable evaluations and appraisals. Virtuosity alone does not yet guarantee esteem.[30] As a result, moralizations can serve as indicators of general social relevance, with the proviso that relevance is always defined in a system-specific way and thus (circumstances permitting) only expresses the social aspirations of small groups with their predictably distorted views of reality. The general social relevance of morality, the fact that it challenges men as men, does not imply that there can only be one morality in a social system. Even in earlier societies, in fact, this was the exception rather than the rule (Eberhard 1965; Zube 1972).

Thus, moralizations of the political code of bourgeois society (of the progressive/conservative schema) may be the expression of sectarian movements with comprehensive but group-specific ambitions—on the basis of religion, for example, or of youth. However, moralistic reinterpretations of the political code can also spread throughout society and become more or less routine in quite heterogeneous contexts for defining what is relevant. In any case, an identification of the political code with a moral code will result in a process of dedifferentiation that (as a societywide process) must have considerable consequences.

The emergence of a separate and special code for politics presupposes, as we have suggested, a three-tiered differentiation of systems: the development of a discrete subsystem for politics within the political system within society. The political code may also presuppose certain structural characteristics of this political subsystem, for example, an institutionalized opposition. Such a special code cannot expand arbitrarily without being denatured. Its word catalogue would thereby become too rich, and that means it would become inadequate.

To the extent that the political code is drawn indiscriminantly into daily life, dizzy-headed "radicalizations" are unavoidable (Bahr 1972). The discipline which accompanies participation in affairs, and the respect for positions one has once occupied (or perhaps will occupy) both disappear. Similarly, limitations imposed by the structural and contextual conditions for what is possible in the subsystem of politics go unheeded. Only sharply circumscribed subsystems of society can handle highly abstract codes. The diffusion of code symbols throughout the everyday colloquial speech of society robs them of their specific function as a code and substitutes other (e.g., expressive) functions.

The mimicking of politics within educational institutions (which has now become routine) contributes to this sloppy diffusion. This is especially true since it generalizes expectations about politics in the educational process, including the word catalogues of the political code. A new political code must then be developed, but which one? Possibly, we shall slip back into the unceremonious distinction between friends and enemies (who can be identified respectively with the help of ideologies).[31] The code would then be brought into alignment with a social classification of persons or groups, as was typical in the case of socially consolidating dual paradigms of earlier societies (Middleton 1960, pp. 250ff).

There are, to be sure, numerous convergent grounds for such a development. One of these grounds might be the noncoordinated development of political systems within an already unified system of world society. Another ground could be the intense abstractness and evolutionary improbability of bourgeois political arrangements. In addition, it may perhaps be relevant that, in one important field, distribution, the insufficiency of the dual paradigm of politics is obvious.

Whoever remains unconvinced by present-day experiences can infer from the two thousand year old discussion of the problem of justice that distributive functions cannot be schematized in a binary fashion (Rescher 1966; Nathan 1971, pp. 4ff). The bare schematism of equal/unequal admits random values as concrete distributive criteria. In order for binary schematisms to become fundamental to the structure of social systems, distributive problems must already have been solved (or prevented from being problematicized) in another way. Early bourgeois society, still operating on the basis of a legalistic political code, found here the formula for separating the (constitutional) State from (economic or market) society. That formula was inadequate in many respects. Today, it has been suggested that concern for growth should be given priority over concern for distribution, since producing more items to be distributed is more important than regulating who gets what.[32] This, of course, requires both the stabilization of long-range temporal horizons and a certain degree of satisfaction of ephemeral needs. The capacity of this solution model to be sustained depends not least of all on the inherent limits to growth of complex systems. It is apparent that this sort of solution can only be valid periodically. In other words, it must be relativized to rather short historical epochs.

By reflecting in this way on the future, however, we very quickly lose touch with the precise outlook we have tried to establish. The concept of a code presented here is solely an analytical, not a prognostic instrument. Neither the function of a code nor even important features of its sociostructural compatibility provide any guarantee that the code will be maintained in the future. The projected tendencies toward de-differentiation and remoralization (which, roughly speaking, are accompanied by a sloppy dissemination of the language of the political code and an increasing mimicking of politics throughout society) could well be symptoms for momentous changes which cannot be predicted with any certainty.

Nevertheless, a prefatory awareness of such developments can be furnished by a revised concept of codes (sharpened for analytical purposes) and by recalling the problems of structural compatibility in general. The most important things to be considered would be:

(1) that, on the basis of binary codes, the elementary growth processes of self-substituting orders can be governed;

(2) that a code is not a consensus rule in the sense that we could agree to one of its counterparts but not to the other—for example to truth but not to falsehood or to progress but not to conservation;

(3) that the disjunction of the code must itself be distinguished from its reduplication as an antagonism within the affiliated ideologies—that, in other words, "conservative" does not exactly mean what "progressives" imagine it to mean.

If we attend to the plurality of structural levels on which social systems govern themselves, then even the continuing transformations of "bourgeois" society can be grasped with greater analytical precision.

9

The Economy as a Social System

I

The idea of treating the economy as a system of social interaction seems at first glance to be plausible, reasonable, even obvious. However, with a second look, considerable difficulties come to light. With one important exception (Parsons and Smelser 1956), no sociological theory has claimed to interpret the economy as a whole. Theories that try to understand society itself as an economic enterprise for the organization of production and for the distribution of mutual benefits fail to accomplish this task. Generally, sociologists believe that they can turn economic research over to the economists. Furthermore, the very concept of a system is still in need of adequate clarification. On the one hand, there is the familiar, traditional European way of describing a whole as more than the sum of its parts. On the other hand, there is the tendency, which goes back to the late Middle Ages, of construing a system as a logically consistent network of relations.[1] This second interpretation seems to be prevalent in economics. For the aims of sociology, however, both approaches are probably insufficient: the first is too unclear, while the second is too clear to be applicable to highly complex, self-constituting contexts of meaningful interaction.

We might well suspect that these difficulties are connected and that through a recasting of the fundamental concepts involved they could be, if not removed, then at any rate placed in a more favorable research-context. One important indication of this comes from recent sociological work on the social system of politics. The traditional European theory of politics was a theory of politically constituted society. Only long after the collapse of this tradition could a sociological theory of politics begin its work; it no longer identified politics with the essence of society, but instead conceived of it as a functionally necessary subsystem of society along with other subsystems (Easton 1965b; Wiseman 1966; Parsons 1966b; Mitchell 1967; and see selection 7). This approach makes us keep in mind at least two different levels—that of society and that of its subsystems. Accordingly, we can no longer speak of political society (*societas civilis*), whose essence, genesis, and mode of integration rest upon political domination; instead we must talk of societies in which the political subsystem may happen to have functional primacy. The success of this conceptual reorientation suggests that we should proceed analogously for the realm of the economy. Here, too, from the early bourgeois, utilitarian, and Marxist prehistory of sociology we are familiar with attempts to conceive of society itself in economic categories. However, these traditions of thought did not lead to a sociology of the economy or even to fruitful interdisciplinary contacts between sociology and economics. Perhaps we could reach better results by carrying through here as well the separation of the two levels mentioned above, understanding the economy as a functionally necessary subsystem of society.

From simply a formal point of view, we must expect that a research program operating with a number of system-references must itself be organized relativistically.[2] Such a theory gains in complexity, although at the price of certain difficulties in manipulating and applying its conceptual and analytical apparatus. The question is what modifications are needed to bring the existing forms of systems theory up to this level.

Both of the classical approaches, the whole/part schema and the idea of a logically consistent system, were aimed only at the internal relations of a system. Thus, they were bound to have trouble satisfying the requirements we have cited. Recent developments in systems theory, on the other hand, focus on the environment of a system, attempting to understand systems as dependent upon and communicating with their environment. These developments, while differing among themselves, can be summarized as a whole in the fundamental idea that systems are reductions of the complexity of the world. They must therefore constantly sustain problematic relationships to an environment that is not itself similarly reduced.[3] Systems acquire an identity through their characteristic means of reducing complexity. If we set out from this highly abstract formulation of the problem, we can then, after settling upon one reference, functionally analyze and compare all structures as selection processes. On this basis, a theory of society will have to concern itself with ideas such as the reduction of the extreme complexity and contingency of the world and with the creation of an ordered environment for all the subsystems in a society. Its emphasis will probably lie in a theory of social evolution and a theory of system differentiation. But for the time being it is a postulate to be taken in terms of the outline we have just given (Luhmann 1970a).

Below this level of abstraction, sociological theories about the primary subsystems of society, in particular about the realms of politics, the economy, science, and family-life, can already take on precise contours—if, that is, we change references and treat each system (the political, the economic, etc.) within a given social environment. Even without having established a complete theory of society, we can begin with the idea that the evolution of human society, through increased functional differentiation in modern times, has led to a situation that is without historical parallel. The possible forms of experience and action that are to be expected in society have reached a degree of complexity that demands thoroughly new forms of adaptation. Even subsystems that have not changed (churches, perhaps) acquire a higher selectivity now that they appear as one choice among many other possibilities of satisfying human needs. It seems to be more typical, however, that systems like the economy or politics seek to increase their own complexity—that is, what is economically or politically possible—in order to comply with the increase of complexity in their social environment. And in this way the environment of other systems becomes more complex.

This analysis would have to be supported by a theory of the system of total society, while for the theory of the economic system it is only an assumption about that system's social environment. But if it is correct, we should be able, taking the economy as a subsystem of society, to indicate those structures and mechanisms with which the economy adapts itself to changes in social complexity. How far this approach can lead to a satisfactory theory of the economy is something we shall have to find out in the course of the discussion. It will allow a sociological theory of the economy to keep an eye on the whole society (which is the specifically sociological perspective) while at the same time investigating the particular structures that the economy exhibits as one subsystem of society.

II

We understand economic life as a social system only if we can specify the problem that must be solved. That is not simply or chiefly a matter of conceptual definition. Concepts can only copy and make explicit what in social evolution has been differentiated into an independent phenomenon. By this I mean that the economy does not exist naturally, but instead is in every way an evolutionary achievement. Thus, economic concepts that appeal to "nature" are inadequate for our purposes.[4] Among such concepts that must be discarded are the old natural law theory of the economy, which saw in economics a particular practical and moral institution for the satisfaction of human needs; and the materialist theory, which grew out of it and which related the economy to particular "matérial," fundamental needs and deduced from their *natural* primacy over other needs the *social* primacy of the economy. This was an idea that led to the conception of a society no longer "civil" but "bourgeois," no longer political but economic.

We can find better approaches among recent proposals in economic theory to take the rational structure of action (the means/ends schema), or the mechanism of money, or the problem of scarcity as a point of departure for defining the economy. These definitions may be too broad or too narrow, but they do make it possible to inquire into the evolutionary and structural conditions for the development of the economy. If we are going to pursue the idea that the economy is a subsystem of society, we shall have to let systems theory reinterpret the idea of means/ends rationality (Luhmann 1968a), the mechanism of money, and the idea of scarcity. We may then pose our question more abstractly: for what functions does society actually develop means/ends rationality as a decision-making principle, money as an institution, and scarcity as a problem and, through a process of differentiation, bring them into a separate and efficient system?

Finally, economic life does not seem to depend upon specific, delimitable needs. Instead, it has to do with *the possibility of deferring a decision about the satisfaction of needs while providing a guarantee that they will be satisfied and so utilizing the time thus acquired.* From this point of view, the fundamental problem of the economy lies in the dimension of time. All life flows through the inescapable present. By opening up and pacifying a future perspective of this present, the economy is able to clear a space for action in the meantime and thus for rationality as well: we can specify needs and the means for satisfying them only to the extent that we can defer some of these needs and guarantee their satisfaction in the future. In addition to these temporal aspects of the economy, its social aspects are no less important or dispensable (that was the mistake in the Robinson Crusoe model). But they are secondary in the sense that it is the temporal dimension that regulates their set of problems (and not the reverse). Therefore, in the economic domain the necessary social, legal, and political measures depend upon the extent to which the future is problematized and planned for economically. For example, they depend upon the extent to which one can arrange for a future that extends beyond daily needs and periods of hunting and harvest. (From the point of view of society in its entirety, in other words, if we change the system-reference of our analysis, it would naturally make just as much sense to say that how far we can grasp the future depends upon possibilities in our language, upon political peace over a broad geographical area, upon the stage of development in technology and knowledge, upon family structure, upon the so-called socialization into middle-class values, etc.; we shall return to this point in the next section).

Even the material order underlying the economic structure seems to be secondary to the temporal order, because the satisfaction of future needs must be treated as a present problem, owing to the idea of scarcity. Scarcity does not mean the same thing as the rarity or lack of objects, nor does it refer to deprivations, distress, or danger; it is not a property of nature nor a given natural relation between needs and the possibilities for satisfying them. Rather, it is an abstract point of comparison whereby needs can be treated independently of situations. By means of the idea of scarcity, needs can remain expressed over time, and by reference to the mechanism of money equivalences are set up among them. Money is chronically scarce, and thus it is appropriate as a continuous expression of the abstract necessity of guaranteeing in the present the satisfaction of future needs. Connected with this aspect of scarcity is an abstract readiness for doing without, namely the motivation to dispense with satisfying currently felt needs for the sake of concretely incomparable future needs of a different sort. Consequently, it cannot be the function of the economy to remove scarcity. Instead, it creates scarcity as a schema peculiar to it as a system. With this schema it can work upon inconsistent demands and can define temporal, material, and social problems of distribution. Thus, scarcity does not decrease; it increases with the heightening of economic efficiency.

Our thesis that the problem to be focused upon lies in the temporal dimension can be checked if we look at the economy in its relation to the immediate satisfaction of needs (consumption). The real possibilities for consumption are held within anthropologically fixed limits and thus they remain very small. The wish to eat more, to become warmer, to experience more very quickly runs up against its limits. Economic development therefore cannot be driven, as theoreticians of the nineteenth century assumed, by a kind of human insatiability. Its motor lies rather in the structures of the economy as a social system. Today, through an illusory premium put upon consumption, it creates the respect for money that is needed for a comprehensive mastery of the future. Here we can see that it is the temporal dimension that "leads the way." The conspicuous consumption described by Veblen forms only one aspect of this situation. Here too belongs above all the continual enshrouding of consumer goods with arbitrarily high values, as well as nonmonetary scales for heightening consumption—such as rarity, novelty, etc. By these means a "higher" consumption becomes a part of experience. Illusions of this sort—that a vacation in the Bahamas is worth more than a vacation on the Baltic Sea—have to be presented rather vaguely, in order to leave open the freedom needed in the economic system for choosing among consumer goods. They have to be made plausible with regard to reality and, to the extent that they are illusory, they have to be institutionalized—i.e., supported by an assumed consensus. From these rather artificial requirements of the economy we can read off what we have been claiming—that the economy obeys not an immanent logic of needs, but instead the need for an immanent logic; that to the extent that the economy specializes in the function of deferring decisions, it is itself dependent upon a multiplicity of social processes and thus draws behind it highly complex presuppositions (if this paradoxical formulation is permitted); and that in this whole context there is expressed a primacy of the problematic of time in human existence which the social processes obey. Naturally, this abstract sketch of the problem at hand still does not yield any maxims for right action. However, it can be developed further sociologically, if we inquire into the conditions under which it can become a social reality. We are going to presuppose that the necessary conditions in the whole society (e.g., conceptual, linguistic, political, and technical conditions) for a secure deferral of the satisfaction of needs are realized and exist as utilizable givens in the environment of the economic system. We shall limit ourselves to pursuing this question further in relation to the economic system. In other words, we are asking how a structure in which the satisfaction of needs is temporally guaranteed takes on a concrete form in the particular social system of the economy and in its relations to its social environment.

III

By posing the question in this form, we have nearly leapt beyond the chief problem: how a particular subsystem of society can be differentiated from the rest of society and given the specific function of temporally guaranteeing the satisfaction of needs.

It is characteristic especially of earlier, archaic societies that economic functions are fulfilled within the framework of other, multifunctional social institutions. They are combined in a number of different ways with familial, political, religious, or military functions. Because these societies are small and segmentally differentiated, they cannot bear the risk of abstracting specific functions from one another. For them, the problem of providing for existence is solved by stocking supplies and maintaining social relations of mutual assistance. Both of these solutions are "small-scale," quantitatively limited in terms of things and persons. Structurally, it is quite significant that these two strategies of stockpiling and mutual assistance are related to each other in the form of *functional equivalence and contradiction.* On the one hand, they offer alternatives and possible choices of a limited complexity; on the other hand, they stand in the way of each other. As we know from a wealth of ethnological accounts, there exists in all such societies a sort of institutionalized compulsion to exchange gifts, which hinders the amassing of capital that is utilizable for purely economic purposes: economic surplus, in the form of presents, feasts, or emergency aid, is transformed into unspecified obligations, political power, general respect, and social status (Goodfellow 1954; Schott 1956; Belshaw 1965, esp. p. 46f.; Sigrist 1967, p. 176f.). In return, the social relations of getting along well with one another in themselves have an economic value, insofar as they are not motivated purely economically, but instead are carried along by other social considerations, above all by kinship and through legal, political, and military dependence. Thus, they cost nothing. The role-structure, primarily determined by age and kinship, permits, indeed demands, that economic, political, and friend-foe considerations change back and forth. In that lies the potential for adaptation in these societies. Emergency defense and compromises among needs remain, under these circumstances, accomplishments of the whole society. Credit is a social, and not a purely economic quantity.

It is against this background of relatively simple societies, poor in alternatives and structured in a functionally diffuse way, that our problems about the differentiation within society of a specifically economic social system takes shape. Naturally, differentiation cannot mean that the economy cuts itself loose from the society, that communication has broken down, and that relations of dependence are given up. It is not a matter of the economy's seceding from the society,[5] but rather of a restructuring of the interdependences whereby functional realms no longer depend upon one another in all their individual accomplishments, but instead only through system/environment relations.

Differentiation is achieved first of all at the level of roles, namely through the rise of *markets* as a new form (in addition to aid, gifts, and feasts) of utilizing surplus and meeting needs. Since to this day, although no longer fulfilling their function completely, markets have retained a central significance, and since they support the external and internal differentiation of the economic system while other economic subsystems are oriented toward them, we must sketch their structure and function.

Looked at formally, markets rest upon the introduction of legal negatability into the relation between persons and things.[6] This negatability underlies the sense of risk that is linked with the differentiation of the economic system and that must be institutionalized. The particular interest behind this development has to do with establishing exchangeable quantities. And because negatability has to do with a *relation* and not with merely a person or a thing alone, this is doubly true:[7] a thing can change its owner and the owner can change the things he owns. If we add that the market places several persons as potential buyers and sellers in relation to each other, it becomes obvious that for *at least two* participants the market always makes available two points of comparison—namely, the comparison of one thing with another and the comparison of one person, who wants to have something or to give it away under specific conditions, with other persons, who want to have or give away something under other conditions. It is clear that both possibilities cannot be cashed in simultaneously (a relation cannot be arbitrarily varied on both sides, since the fixing of one side is a condition for varying the other).[8] Instead, individual cases determine how this infinite complexity will be reduced, while the market as a system must be kept structurally neutral, in order to mediate the combination of these reductions.

We must look at the conditions of possibility for the forms of comparison that are thus constituted. They presuppose evolutionarily improbable abstractions—the points of view from which equalities and inequalities can be judged. These abstractions cannot claim a thoroughgoing validity for all situations. Instead, in other relationships they must be ignored. This leads us back to the question of differentiation. The equivalences and nonequivalences in the market can no longer be those of religion, of the family, or of politics. As has often been said but not clearly understood, the market makes "impersonal" relations possible: it neutralizes the relevance of the other roles of the participants, and it removes the mutually binding moral controls that evaluate persons and thus moral *engagement* as well.

All of these phenomena taken together—logical infinity and individual reduction, abstract perspectives, "insecurity" or the withdrawal of concrete reliance upon familiar persons and mutual confirmation in all social relations—are the expression of a structural tolerance of very high complexity. It gives rise to problematic consequences that are internal to markets, and especially to uncertainties about how to orient oneself and make decisions in the marketplace. In all simple markets there thus arise "secondary personalizations" (Belshaw 1965, pp. 56f., 66f., 78f.). A wife shops at "her" reliable market woman, who is especially concerned about "her" customers. In more complex markets, where organizations rather than individuals make exchanges, and where personalization is thus not possible, other functionally equivalent "mollifications" replace it—above all agreements about limiting competition. By such means, the complexity and risks of the market are reduced to practicable and secure forms.

Nonetheless, the differentiation of markets remains the principle underlying the differentiation of the economy. So long as the market alone performed this function, there was no alternative. To the public the market remained, because differentiated from the rest of society, a marginal phenomenon. The economy was experienced in terms of production and consumption as a household economy (*oikonomia*). Even an already significant level of trade did not appear to endanger the self-sufficiency of the village household or city. Only when, in the course of modern times, production was differentiated in the form of large enterprises to an increasing extent, namely when it became independent of the household and dependent upon the market (Smelser 1959), did the necessity arise of grasping and analyzing the economy as such. It was to be understood no longer merely as an object of the princely and paternal accumulation of wealth or of police regulations, but instead as a system on its own, with its own natural law, its own regulations, its own logic of decision-making. With some simplification we can say that it was not the specific risks of a differentiated economy, already visible in the economic crises of the Roman Empire and of the late middle ages, that led to an awareness of the economy as a system, but rather the internal differentiation of the economic system that compelled this abstraction to be made. In the political system things were otherwise. Here the separation of powers was projected as the answer to the risk that political domination would become differentiated from the rest of society—and indeed probably because at that time politics and not the economy bore the risks of social development.

We shall return to the problems of internal differentiation and the increase of risks in sections V and VI. First we must clarify more sharply some general consequences of the differentiation of the economy as a particular subsystem.

Differentiation from the rest of society makes possible, not self-sufficiency or independence, but rather a high degree of autonomy or self-regulation in the economy. Especially with the help of the mechanism of money the economy builds its own values, its own goals, norms, criteria of rationality, and directions of abstraction, by means of which the behavioral choices in its domain are oriented. That these premises stand on their own is clear from the fact that they claim only a system-specific validity and thus do not need to be answerable to all of society. This allows risky and improbable heightenings of abstraction and specification to arise, as well as a mobilization of possibilities that from the beginning are only economic ones, and not political, legal, technical, moral, or emotional ones as well. In an economic context labor can be treated as a commodity, because it has properties similar to those of other particular quantities—and because in the religious, political, familial, educational, or medical systems it can *not* be so treated. Wealth does not automatically yield political power, love, truth, cultivated behavior, or education, even if statistics reveal certain correlations that indicate an above-average participation in a number of these areas. Thanks to these forms of differentiation society can dispense with a concrete (e.g., religious or moral) orientation for economic *action*, and limit itself to giving the economy as a *system* the necessary protection. This entails especially cultural generalizations of the conception of time in the economy, the global legitimation of these economic values, and the institutionalization of rules for separating the economy from other domains in society. Among such rules are that officials and politicians should not be bribed, that business property and private property be separated in accounting and in law, that job and family be kept at a certain distance from each other, that marriage be for love and not for economic gain, and that there be behavioral maxims such as "in financial matters friendship ceases." This is possible only if there is a guarantee that economic decisions do not *eo ipso* fulfill political, familial, educational, and military functions and that changes in the economy not be automatically carried over into other functional domains of the society, but instead be perceived by them as changes in their environment that can be worked over adaptively.

On the basis of an autonomy that is thus heightened within limits, forms of experience and behavior that are rich in presuppositions and, as it were, unnaturally one-sided are developed in the system of the economy. Actions that otherwise would have had to rely on wide-ranging considerations about all of society can thus be specialized for purely economic functions. We can train for and work at a highly specialized task; we can transfer our inheritance to make our assets more profitable; we can hire and fire people according to the quality of their labor. The economic orientation of action appears at first glance to point toward calculations of profit and loss and thus to be rationalizable. When we look at the social function of the economy (and not only at its structurally determined premises for decision-making), actions are economically oriented because through a guaranteed deferral of the satisfaction of needs they acquire the latitude in which they can operate.

Through credit and the accumulation of capital, resources are created that under certain conditions are constant over time and with which according to familiar rules we can move about among appreciable risks. That has consequences for the whole understanding of time, and most of all for a restructuring of the temporal horizons of the past and future. Whereas all simple societies find their structure and their security in a past they concretely live through and remember, thus remaining bound to tradition and past experience (except when innovations are readily apparent and immediately successful), we can now capitalize upon the past and take it as a fund for dealing with an open future. The past remains a basis for security, but in a more abstract form. It does not bind the future so that it becomes merely a continuation of existing conditions. Instead, the past structures the future simply as a domain for making a limited number of choices. In this way the future becomes for the first time truly problematizable (Kaufmann 1970, esp. p. 174f.). The difference between constant conditions and uncanny surprises that are possible at any time—which was once the only way that the present could be understood—can be replaced by predictions and planning. The indeterminate complexity of the future, against which man had once opposed magical techniques or religious certainties because he experienced it in the form of supernatural powers can be transformed into a specific or at least specifiable complexity. It thereby becomes possible to believe in a contingent future and to conceive the present as the moment in which decisions are made about the future—as it were, the instant in which the past that leads up to and fits a foreseen future can be chosen, or missed.[9]

Among the far-reaching and complex consequences of this restructuring of time there are two that should be particularly emphasized. Within the framework of a very abstract legal order governing purely economic expectations, the economy undergoes a switch from a normative to a cognitive attitude (Luhmann 1969b). Expectations that are normative—i.e., counterfactual and incapable of adapting to changed conditions—are replaced by expectations that can learn and adapt to change. When prices rise, one either pays more or does not buy anything, but the change is not defined as a moral failure that would justify issuing sanctions and maintaining the expectation of the old price.[10] It seems that the constancy of morality over time, which is supported by all of society, can be replaced by the constancy over time of purely economic opportunities. This is especially true for continually utilizable capital or a regular income. In addition to the abstract protection offered by politics and law mentioned above, this development requires that expectations be capable of change and, most of all, that disappointments let us know quickly and clearly where and to what extent expectations must be changed. The structure of the market, business accounting, and household budgeting, in their interconnections, bring the economy rather close to fulfilling this presupposition.

The second set of consequences worthy of note in the functional differentiation of the economy from the rest of society emerges in the realm of communication. These too can be brought under the heading of heightening performance. To the extent that the complexity of the economy increases in the form of an expanded and predetermined future horizon, the selectivity behind every consequential decision increases as much as the need for communication. More information and more voicing of opinions is needed to exploit the opportunities for rationality that are created by the structure of the system. This increased need, which arises through differentiation, is in principle met by differentiation itself—through communication being limited to specifically economic matters and hence accelerated. For example, the communication of set prices requires no further discussion. Through this lack of ambiguity, economic communication becomes indifferent to circumstances, to biographical details, and to personal acquaintances. People do not need to know each other and to size up each other morally in order to come to an understanding.[11]

IV

In the preceding discussion about the differentiation of the economy as a system, we set aside for special treatment what might well be the most important aspect: the differentiation of a special communications medium in the form of money. A sociological analysis of the mechanism of money must fall within one of two more abstract conceptual frameworks: a general theory of system differentiation and a general theory of communications media.[12] Both these theories underlie the thesis that the differentiation of the primary social subsystems (in our case, the economy) relies upon the institutionalization of specific communications media which determine its structure.

Men live in a meaningfully constituted and thus exceedingly complex world; we may thus infer that there must be a transference of choices which guarantees that some people accept what other people choose. Otherwise, in virtue of the multiplicity of possible experiences and actions, men would cease to live together and no longer see eye to eye. Furthermore, we can assume that with the rising complexity in the possibilities of man's world and the society encompassing his experiences and actions, these transference mechanisms must become more efficient and transfer meaning at a higher level of selectivity. Consequently, in all social systems we can expect such structures and mechanisms, and their character will depend upon the stage of social evolution.

This achievement, seen as a whole, depends upon a number of evolutionarily stabilized structures, and in particular upon the species having the same perceptual apparatus and language. We shall speak of *communications media* in a narrower sense whenever *the recipient accepts the message they express because he knows how it was selected.* Typical cases that are important for all of society include, besides money, truth, love, and power. Among their corresponding subsystems are respectively science, the family, and politics (Luhmann 1967a). Money's peculiarities as a mechanism arise from the way it fulfills the general function of a communications medium: it does so in a manner different from that of truth, love, and power. The unity of society as a system is expressed in the functional equivalence of these communications media, while its differentiation is expressed in the differences among them.

In contrast to truth and love, the particular character of money and of power lies in their ordering not the selection of identical experiences, but the selection of actions. One of the results is that the selection is done openly and is attributable to individuals. However, power and money differ in the way they shape this relation to decision-making (Vickers 1965, p. 122f.). In the case of power the person makes a decision (or at least decides upon a premise for decision-making) for someone else and motivates him to accept the situation in view of the unpleasantness of the alternative. In the case of money the person makes a decision for himself. He reduces complexity by settling upon a need and satisfying it, and he motivates the other person to satisfy this need by dispensing with and surrendering his own freedom of choice. Thus, in the case of power reduced complexity is transferred, while in the case of money complexity itself is transferred in the form of a freedom to carry out one's own reduction.[13]

On this feature rests the contribution that the mechanism of money makes to the differentiation of the economy. The complexity symbolized by money has a structural characteristic: *one can spend a sum of money only once.* Hence, it has no far-reaching (extra-economic) symbolic significance—either for the position or for the person of the one who utilizes it. In this sense it remains structurally without consequences. Thus, it can be left out of the normative considerations affecting all of society and assigned to contingent constellations of motives. In the economic system itself it is limited by the principles of a zero-sum game. When someone uses money the complexity of open possibilities does not need to be regenerated either in his position (as in the case of power) or in his person (as in the case of love), since in the act of exchange it is not lost by the system, but rather transferred.

Thus, money's distinctive feature lies in the way it puts complexity into motion as a limited free access to the satisfaction of needs. It thereby preserves this complexity in the system, whereas all the other media transfer reduced complexity and so are in danger of losing complexity (in the sense of an access to other possibilities). Thanks to money, handling complexity becomes possible because everyone will be able to acquire the advantages of a reduction by producing freedom for others. Throughout the economic system, a permanent complexity of possible choices remains preserved despite continual reduction. The paradoxical "morality" of money is that everyone may choose from the total available possibilities only to the extent that those possibilities are not then lessened in number. For the sake of preserving complexity money is institutionalized according to the abstract rules of a zero sum game.

By means of this continual redistribution of open and realized possibilities there is produced what we mentioned above as the specific function of the economic system: the possibility of deferring a decision about the satisfaction of needs and yet guaranteeing their satisfaction at the present time. In this lies, from the viewpoint of the economy, the advantage of a temporal compromise between needs and the possibilities of satisfying them which befall us at different times. Meanwhile, the chances for agreement grow with the period of time that lies at disposal, and that provides compensation for the difficulties in agreement that increase with growing differentiation. From the individual's viewpoint money allows him to make provisions for the future. Basically we only need to worry about money in order to meet the future within the framework of what is technically and socially possible. In this regard money supersedes religious guarantees. It becomes a "god term" (Burke 1961, p. 355f.) in the economic realm. Finally, the expansion of the temporal horizon requires a change in the stimuli and rules that attract people's attention. Their attention has to be drawn to what is not immediate. Thus, it cannot depend too concretely upon signals like movement, novelty, or pain. The mechanism of money offers *pain-surrogates* in the form of financial losses.

These brief remarks may serve to outline the functions of money, but the conditions for its institutional success have not yet been sufficiently understood. Such success arises when money becomes *generalized* as a symbol—i.e., through its being made in principle independent of discontinuities in the various other dimensions of the world. In the temporal dimension money symbolizes an *ever-present utilizability* (liquidity). It thereby becomes a resource that is relatively independent of time. We may have it and then later we may not. Money becomes a symbol of economic potential that is continually guaranteed, but also chronically scarce. This neutralization of temporal distinctions requires not only that currency remain identical in exchange and that values remain constant or change in a uniform way. It also requires the continual fulfillment of those conditions that make money useful—namely, an easy and constant accessibility to the possibilities that one can realize with it. From this it follows not only that money must be generalized temporally (i.e., rendered indifferent to the points in time in which it is utilized), but also that it must thereby ensure corresponding abstractions in material and social regards.

Materially, money functions as a measure of value and as a basis for comparing different goods. It must thus be neutralized against the specific properties of the goods or services that one buys with it. Socially, money functions as a universally applicable means of exchange. It must thus be neutralized not only against the things that are exchanged for it, but also against the persons with whom exchange takes place. Money would lose its function if its value depended upon the individual motives of particular partners in an exchange. Thus, money makes it possible to ignore the differences typical of when something is bought, the material content of what is bought, and the persons involved in the purchase. These generalizations mutually support each other in that each presupposes and confirms the other. If it were not exchangeable with anyone, money would cease to function as a measure of value and would lose its liquidity. Thus all these functions can only be institutionalized together.

If this analysis proves that money is a completely integrated (and, to that extent, evolutionarily improbable) symbolic medium, there are a number of complications still to come. At a closer look, that remarkable indifference toward differences on the temporal, material, and social dimensions shows a surprising "sensitivity." That indifference pertains only to the communications medium itself and not to the attitudes of those who use it. Rather, in virtue of the institutional abstractness of this medium, a heightened and refined ability to inform and motivate becomes possible, since minute differences can be reflected in money. It can really make a difference whether we buy heating oil today or tomorrow, whether we buy vegetables at a farmer's market or a supermarket, whether we put our money in stocks or bonds or real estate, whether we have the old car repaired or we buy a new one. To be sure, these differences are obvious; but they become economically relevant and motivate decisions, however, because money opens up possibilities for comparison. The indifference of money makes it possible to discern the differences in these alternatives. To this extent we may say that money is the precondition for learning in the economy—the precondition for that restructuring of the style of expectation that we asserted above was a consequence of the differentiation of the economy.[14] Money multiplies the opportunities and compulsions to learn that arise in the domain of the economy in a way that cannot be ratified at a central locus in the society (e.g., political authority).

The generalized abstractness which is characteristic of this medium and responsible for the indifference we described above gives rise to another dimension in the regulation of economic behavior, which rests upon a different form of abstraction. Money is also a reflexive mechanism, which is something we must distinguish from a generalizing abstraction. We shall call reflexive those processes which are applied to themselves before they reach their material goal (Luhmann 1966a): thinking about thought is the classic example, but there are many others. Today, a great many of the essential mechanisms (maybe all of them) that support society become reflexive: the positivity of law rests upon the normative positing of norms, the democratic form of the political system depends upon the possibility of overpowering those in power. Since Jean Paul, "love for the sake of love" has been deemed the highest form of personal relationship. Making decisions about decision-making is the governing principle of bureaucracy, and planning in science must depend upon research about research. In this sense, money too is a reflexive mechanism, and indeed one with several levels of reflexivity.

By virtue of the generalizing abstractions we have described so far money makes it possible for exchange processes to become reflexive. That is, it makes possible the exchanging of possibilities of exchange. It is this which establishes the freedom of utilization that lies in the immediate possession of money. In exchanging money we can prepare ourselves for further exchange, but we do not have to commit ourselves. However, at this stage the possibilities are not exhausted. At a higher level of reflexivity, not only exchange but money itself can become reflexive. We can apply the mechanism of money to itself, paying for money itself with the interest due after obtaining it on credit. At this third level of exchanging the possibility of exchanging the possibility of exchange, wider possibilities of guiding behavior through economic calculation can be put into effect. They establish comparisons not only from the viewpoint of what things cost, but also from the viewpoint of what money costs. Moreover, at this level there arises a new possibility of structural differentiation: that between financing by credit and financing by creating money. It seems that this kind of differentiation (and as one of the limits to the functional differentiation of the social system it is worthy of note) cannot be carried through on a purely economic basis. It presupposes various forms of reliance upon noneconomic social structures—namely, upon credit ratings that are conditioned by noneconomic factors in the one case, and politically legitimated competencies for decision-making in the other. Furthermore, by virtue of this kind of differentiation, a fourth level of reflexivity can be constructed by using the possibilities inherent in the creation of money to regulate the conditions for exchanging the possibility of exchanging the possibility of exchange. It is thereby possible within the mechanism of money to differentiate between levels of reflexivity in which decisions about money fulfill primarily mediating functions and that highest level at which decisions have to be made about administrative functions.

It ought to be possible to begin, on the basis of these sociological remarks, a discussion of the theory of money. For our purposes, however, it is more important to point out that a theory of reflexive mechanisms makes possible quite abstract possibilities of comparison. We can, for example, develop analogies to other domains of meaning in society, finding parallel structures, say, in legal theory, in the theory of power, or in the theory of knowledge that also are concerned with increasingly abstract and reflexive administrative hierarchies in social processes. In all these cases the reflexive structure suggests similar questions—e.g., questions concerning the limits of repeating the application of a process to itself;[15] or the question of the identity of the process which, however much administrative processes must be anticipated in their application upon itself, still has to remain the same;[16] or the question of what different ways the process may be susceptible to external administration and thus to variations in the environment at the individual levels of its reflexivity;[17] or the question of the different ways the processes can be disturbed at their individual levels.[18] Issues of this sort can neither be absorbed into an economic theory about economic interdependencies, nor can they be worked into the conception of a bourgeois, or a proletarian, economically constituted society. An adequate investigation of these problems can be carried out only in a theory of the system of society that proceeds more abstractly and that can do justice to the real complexity of present-day society and the structures and administrative mechanisms it has constructed.

V

It can be shown in a number of ways that as the complexity of society and the differentiation of functionally specific subsystems increase, there is a shift in the risks facing human conduct. Thus, for a long time after the turn of the seventeenth century political theory reflected on the fact that the pacification of large regions by the new "state" accompanied the creation of new sorts of political risks that had to be absorbed into the political system through new structures and new political practice. They had to be absorbed through a new idea of rationality, the education of princes, the separation of powers, the constitutional state, democracy, or whatever the more or less inadequate recipes were called. Political risks form the prototype of our problem. This is probably because in a society that was established politically and understood itself in those terms, politics had to bear the major risks of social evolution, especially in matters having to do with law or war and peace. If we grasp the problem formally enough, i.e. from the standpoint of a society which, as a system, is no longer constituted only politically, other analogous shifts in what count as risks come into view. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, an awareness developed of the risk of passionate (i.e., uncontrollable) love, once love became institutionalized as the basis of marriage. The twentieth century has been exposed to the risk of a socially differentiated "value-neutral" mode of research that is dedicated only to an abstract concept of truth. What is the case, in this regard, with the risk of a differentiated economy that is integrated through the mechanism of money?

Just as in the other cases, processes of differentiation, functional specification, and abstraction underlie the shift in risk-taking. They make it possible, as we have shown, to concentrate one's provisions for the future in the form of money, and in this way they create a new type of sensitivity and a new type of threat, which would not have existed without money. The multifaceted problems facing the precautions individuals take for getting their necessary goods are transformed into the functional risk represented by the mechanism of money. The functioning of money regulates individual conduct through specialized forms of education, official positions, activities, and modes of consumption that all depend upon money. Almost all activity ceases to be direct, but becomes transformed by money into the satisfaction of needs. Thus, it is affected by disturbances in the mechanism of money. Practically speaking, in its various functions as liquidity, a measure of value, and a means of exchange, money has become the *universal* communications medium of the economy. No economic good can withhold itself from it.[19] Economic goods like real-estate, consumer goods, and legal claims of a specific sort are merely "investments," temporarily frozen preferences, whose liquidation into money is possible at any time. It can be treated merely as a question of profit and loss. Thus, the whole gamut of economic resources is tied to the specific risks lying in the mechanism of money. In place of calamities affecting means of subsistence, which resulted from a lack of possibilities for satisfying needs, and which seldom occur today in domains that are open to the economy, economic crises of a new sort have appeared. They hinge on functional disturbances in the mechanism of money.

In the face of structurally conditioned risks of this type old style household remedies (e.g., frugality) break down. These risks can be neither pinpointed as occurring close to home, nor can they be mystified by means of religion. Instead, corresponding to this centralization of crisis-inducing risks, the possibility—indeed the necessity—of centralized remedies has grown up. If we look over the arrangements in the economy that work against these crises, we find a rather differentiated lot, a multiplicity of functionally equivalent structures and processes which seem to be able to replace one another.

The simplest, almost "natural" defense against these risks seems to lie in the sheltering given to money by objects of real value that we can fall back on when money fails. All social communications media seem to presuppose basic processes of a simpler sort: political power presupposes physical force, love presupposes sexuality, truth presupposes perception. Yet all these cases show that the medium itself is not identical with its basic process; instead, the medium arises by surpassing it in performance, by generalization.[20] Hence, unsheltered risks still remain open and the medium must rely upon the functioning of fictions. Furthermore, the sheltering of money, that most esoteric of all media, by real values has become impossible to the extent that money as a medium specific to the economy has acquired a universal meaning (in the sense defined above). Once this stage is reached, money can be sheltered in the framework of the economy only by other money—and no longer by the opportunities that real values afford for the immediate satisfaction of needs. Sheltering can then take only the form of a higher level of reflexivity, namely the exchangeability of the possibility of regulating, through the creation of money, the conditions for exchanging the possibility of exchanging the possibility of exchange. The stabilizing effect produced by such sheltering would rest chiefly upon disruptive events that never, or very seldom, affect all the levels of reflexivity. Not only these levels, but also the environments and sorts of information relevant to such disturbances become differentiated.

With this set of problems, however, we have not yet exhausted the structures and mechanisms that absorb risks. The distribution of risks through the internal differentiation of the economic system into markets, firms, and households works as a functional equivalent, along with a system of different sorts of buffers and variously distributed elasticities. In the next section we shall begin to discuss the universal function of internal differentiation, and so we shall put aside this topic for now. Instead, we must look, if only briefly, at an increasingly important and third form of taming risks: the passing of risks on to the political system.

In the general context of social differentiation the economy obviously remains dependent upon politics continuing to function, upon peace being assured, upon law being maintained, and upon decisions being made that are binding. Liberal theory held (even if in another conceptual vocabulary) that these interdependencies, conditioned by the differentiation of society, were the only legitimate ones. The economy was supposed to solve its own problems. In the meantime a more elastic conception, both in practice and in theory, has won its way. The origin of a problem is, in functionally differentiated societies, not always the best place for solving it. Hence, it has proven expedient increasingly to use the abstract potential for making binding decisions that is lodged in the political administration to guard against purely economic risks. This takes place on various levels and in relation to various domains of the economy. For example, families are protected by unemployment compensation; firms (at least large ones) are protected by governmental intervention when bankruptcy threatens; sectors of the economy are protected by revitalization programs; and the economy as a whole is protected by government economic policy. Here, although habits and expectations are involved, the distribution of risks is not strictly defined, but is variable to a certain extent. As the handling of the revaluation of the Deutsche mark in 1969 shows, if politics functions poorly, a temporary displacement of risks (here the risk embodied in the exchange rate) back into the economy can ensue.

The political sheltering of specific economic risks should not be confused with earlier, undifferentiated ways of merging politics and the economy. Political questions and economic questions can be separated; they are perceived differently. It is here that the stimulus and the tactical advantage of shifting problems between the two realms rests. Transferring a risk to the political realm presupposes that the economy has been differentiated from it and has attained a relatively high autonomy as a system. It also presupposes that structures and processes proper to the economy tend to heighten risks and give them a form that allows politics to seize them. To the extent that politics sees its job as making compromises among risks created by the economy, it does not lose its autonomy in decision-making, but it does lose control over the posing of problems. We shall see below that this change can be interpreted as a symptom of the transition of social primacy from politics to the economy.

VI

Among the structural questions that arise as soon as a system transcends the most simple relations in quantity and complexity, the problem of differentiation is the most important. It determines in what further ways a system can structure various processes, regulate itself, and strengthen its selectivity. The concept of differentiation refers to the construction of subsystems. Through differentiation, subsystems come to treat each other as environments within the system and thus they can presuppose that the order achieved by the system appears in the ordering of their environments. This rather casual formulation should serve to clarify the function of differentiation. That function lies in a system's ability to gain many times over the advantages of system building whenever it repeats system building internally, guarantees its subsystems and their subsystems an already tame environment and thus builds improbable structures that are rich in presuppositions. System differentiation is a form of strengthening selectivity.

Just as with the political system (see chapter 8), we can see that in the economic system the evolutionary process of external differentiation is accompanied and supported by increasing internal differentiation.[21] We have already indicated that the external differentiation of the economy first established itself at the level of roles in the form of various markets. To this was added, with constant success only after the industrial revolution, the differentiation of firms and households, so that today we must characterize the successful and nonpolitical economies of the Western world by means of a division among markets, firms, and households. It is this type of economy that we must first understand.

The characteristic advantage of such an economy is that its three-part differentiation makes it possible to use various types of differentiation alongside each other, as well as to foresee contradictory and extendable directions for further differentiation. In the domain of households we find a segmental form of differentiation that builds rather equal units, whereas in the domain of markets and firms a functional differentiation prevails that builds unequal units. A combination of the advantages of segmental and functional differentiation thus becomes possible—just as in a completely different way segmental (regional) and functional differentiation are combined in the political system. Above all, a segmental differentiation of the consumer sector (households but also firms) seems to be an important presupposition of industrial mass production. On the other hand, there then exist no limits to the opposite paths that the organization of firms and markets, according to the principle of functional inequality, may take. If need be, these subsystems of the economy can be functionally differentiated, and thus they can reach a high degree of specialized effectiveness. This dual focus is important in itself. Firms and markets do not need to be narrowly attuned to each other through their identity or their functional content. To be sure, firms cannot exist where there are no markets (and *vice versa*). But every firm gains its identity and its rationality (especially its opportunities for profit) from a number of markets (for buying and selling, financing, or personnel). In this way the firm can neutralize somewhat the fluctuations of individual markets. On the other hand, markets arise only when there are a number of firms, which make the participants independent of what happens in the other individual firms. That works as a buffer against various eventualities and as a liberation from too great a need for information.

We know today that in this "classical model" of economic differentiation markets form the weakest link—especially since they cannot develop formal organizations that strictly regulate membership. Such modes of organization work to maintain a system by enhancing adaptation and influencing the environment. But the principle of differentiation whereby events in the market and in the firm come about independently of each other begins to break down in ever larger domains. We might imagine that this form of differentiation could be replaced by another principle—for instance, by a differentiation between decisions that determine market data (prices) and those that determine data about firms (production schedules). Nevertheless such decisions could hardly be kept apart without messages being traded and mutual agreements and alliances being formed. That would be true whether or not the organization making decisions was located in the political system or in large enterprises. Thus, such overarching decisions would introduce a de-differentiation of markets and firms and hence an essential simplification of the primary structure of differentiation in the economy itself. Segmental consumption and functionally differentiated production in firms would stand in direct opposition to one another, if decisions were to be made governing their relation to each other. At the same time markets would collapse as the chief support for the external differentiation of the economic system. The important question is what consequences such a development can have.

We can hardly answer this question with a reliable prediction. We can, however, sketch the contours of the question more distinctly. When we imagine that systems bring about selections partly on the basis of implicit premises of behavior and partly by virtue of the processes of the system itself, it is obvious that structures cannot simply be abandoned; they must be replaced. As long as the world and society remain as complex as they are, the structure and behavior of our economic system remain one choice among many. All that can change is what choice is made. It is from this point of view that I offer the following hypothesis.

The broad evolutionary process whereby the economy was differentiated from the rest of society could at first presuppose only a rather small capacity for decision-making in the form of paternal foresight and (later on) business calculation. But it led eventually to an internal differentiation of markets, households, and firms (conditioned by the phases in the process of external differentiation), whose advantages led to stabilization. Hence, this differentiation was not introduced on the basis of a decision. And in the economic system it could not itself become an object of decisions—not economic ones certainly.[22] Its advantage lay in its structures' permitting a great capacity for differentiation with relatively few decisions actually having to be made. The possibilities inherent in this type of economy were exploited in the course of industrialization. There then arose difficulties in maintaining that three-part internal differentiation. At the same time there was an increase in the demands on decisions about what selections were to be made, while the possibilities for deciding rationally about optimal selections did not increase to the same extent.[23] Thus, we are faced with the question of the extent to which structural selection can be replaced by selection based upon decisions.

Every consciously made decision must be simple, so that by itself it can accomplish only very little. Every decision is inescapably articulated against a background of tacit pre-understandings (Polanyi 1964, p. 67f.). Hence, when several decision-makers work together there arises, though unintentionally, a structure or levels of assumed premises for decision-making. These premises themselves can be made the object of decisions only with considerable difficulty—if at all. Accordingly, at the level of the relations between economic organizations, a basically tactical decision-making process can come into play, presupposing the structure of the economy as given and, thanks to stereotypes, the typical interests of the participants in the milieu as fixed. Thus, anyone who commits himself to overarching interests or strives for structural changes comes under the suspicion of being ideological. Something similar happens to a state-planned administration of society and to an economy that is content to replace poorly functioning markets with programmed and bureaucratically administered distribution processes. At the level of economic policy a similarly tactical use of abstract programs seems to result, having quite differentiated global ideas about how much the economic system can react. At both levels, the economic system creates a rather small capacity for learning. Its adaptive processes consist in concrete reactions. For a stimulus to further learning it remains dependent upon impulses from science or politics—e.g., automation, amelioration of the mathematical bases of economic policy, changes in the political conditions of the international economy. The obvious danger here is that we may replace the relatively large openness and variability of the classical, internal differentiation of the economic system by decision-making processes having too little selectivity and habitual and rigid premises. We would then let the economy sacrifice the maneuverability that became available after the external differentiation of the economy from the rest of society.

In short, there remains the problem of the extent to which complexity can become and remain an object of decision-making. Only if it can, will it be fruitful to rework the present form of differentiation in the economy (markets, households, and firms) into structures for selective decision-making processes that themselves can be planned and decided upon.

VII

This, then, is the direction in which economics should head in order to display its theoretical potential. It cannot and should not travel the same road as sociology. However, it may be useful to summarize once again our already rather complicated argument about the complexity, variability, and rationality of the economy.

By complexity we mean the number of possibilities from which, through experience and action, we can choose—either through structural reduction or through conscious decision-making. Complexity in this sense increases with the functional differentiation of society and the separating out of different possibilities—in our case through the external differentiation and functional specification of the economy. The economic system acquires new possibilities through different ways of combining means and ends—especially by broadening the period of time over which the possibility of such combinations can be guaranteed. This leads to an increase in the selectivity of decisions and in the awareness of their contingency. They are viewed and compared as "investments."

It is particularly remarkable that the concept of the possible can be understood in two senses. It can be used to refer to unmet needs whose satisfaction depends upon the passage of time, and to the economy as a differentiated social system that produces an excess of possibilities. From those possibilities, most of which are unrealizable, a selection must be made. A sum of money may offer many possibilities, only a few of which it can actually be exchanged for, and the whole economy has many possibilities for the future, only a few of which can be planned for in the present. The economy's complexity lies precisely in its giving itself—through this projection of surplus possibilities—both the opportunity and the need for making selections. In the treatment of problems that are internal to the economy, this situation is expressed in the idea of "costs."

Our highly abstract way of posing the problem allows us to view restructurings of the economic system as changes in its complexity and in its selection-making activity. By our method we can compare, for example, market-oriented and planned economic systems.[24] The difference between these two lies in the way premises for economic decisions arise and can then influence how the system makes selections.

The concept of planning should be understood, broadly, to mean decision-making about the premises for decisions,[25] an idea that is perhaps the ultimate development in the acceptance of the function we have attributed to the economy—the possibility of deferring decisions about the satisfaction of needs while guaranteeing that they will be satisfied. In the idea of planning, this function is transferred to a decision-making process and thus subjected to the requirement that choices be rationally comparable. Decision-making about decisions is supposed to permit selection processes to be linked together coherently and productively.

Here again a problem arises: as in the market, a structural tolerance for high complexity produces logical indeterminacy. And just as in the case of the market, we must expect here too the transformation of insoluble problems into soluble ones, a concern with consequences that are internal to the system, heavy demands upon individual behavior, and solutions that conflict with permanent structures. However, planning differs from the market because of the hope that these problems can be solved by developing special techniques for planning (e.g., mathematical instruments to deal with ambiguities, techniques to handle incomplete information or inconsistent, intransitive, or unstable preferences). At least planning seems able to reckon with its own difficulties.

Nonetheless, such ambitions far exceed what can be done at present. And thus the sociologist lacks the funds of past experience and the empirical data that would be required to pass a judgment on the idea of planning. General statements about how a planned state or a technocracy is hampered by the material it tries to handle lead us nowhere. However, we can isolate a few points at which the structures and problems of economic planning come to light.

We might expect that what functions economic planning takes on should make a sizable difference: that is, whether it tries to regulate money or whether it also tries to replace markets; whether it deals only with production or whether it takes into account the possible level of consumption. Such differences in planning arise from the internal differentiation of the economic system. The broader the scope of planning, the more it must take on the functions of differentiation—namely, creating and reducing complexity, stimulating innovation, isolating disturbances, absorbing risks, and simplifying decisions. It is clear that these are logically incompatible functions. Furthermore, the form in which planning yields decision-making premises is also important. It affects whether planning creates the facts by which the decision-makers can (if they choose) orient themselves and at what level of abstraction this occurs (e.g., the stipulation of discount rates, exchange rates, and state budgets). It also affects whether in planning decisions are made according to normative rules, and whether the plan relies upon conditional programs or goal-oriented programs (Luhmann 1968a). Depending on how premises are laid down, the logical and technical possibilities for ordering decisions vary with respect to one another. These possibilities cover everything from mere compatibility to mutually reinforcing choices, and also whether they apply these relations only to the carrying out of a specific plan, or also to a number of plans, or even to the decisions about what plans to adopt. Here arise the logical and mathematical problems that must be solved.

One precondition for the sort of economic planning that must range over long chains of decisions about the premises of decisions about the premises of decisions, etc. is a constantly high degree of differentiation of the economy from the rest of society. Only in this way can an unerring and secure transmission of decisions be guaranteed. A lot depends on this requirement: the ability to motivate economic action in a predictable and specific way, an adequate understanding of the roles in the economy and in bordering systems,[26] and the avoidance of interference from legal privileges, preferences in neighboring areas, religious taboos, political altercations, extramarital sex, and so on. This is especially important if such forms of interference cannot enter into economic calculations or limit their scope too strongly. In the economic system, the practicality of planning is best guaranteed through organizations, which can discipline and limit behavior by laying down rules for membership. For this reason, the roles supporting the differentiation of the economy from society are increasingly shifted from the sphere of the market to that of organizations. On behalf of these organizations the market takes over the function of providing a nonpolitical legitimation for the internal references to external, "material" demands. If the market were to disappear, the need for a political legitimation of the power necessary for these economic organizations would be inescapable.

Finally, we can already recognize that economic planning must bridge different sorts of no doubt rather far-reaching discrepancies and differences in style that a market economy does not have to face. The conflict of interests that is typical of the market (between the buyer and the seller or the consumer and the producer) does not change. However, as soon as higher levels of reflexivity lead to decisions about money, this opposition is surpassed by contradictions of a completely new type. Two of these contradictions are readily apparent.

The exchange of money (buying and selling) and, at the next higher level of reflexivity, the financing of credit must obey the principles of a zero-sum game. The sum of money involved must be assumed to be constant. In administrative decisions about economic policy, however, this constant is treated as a variable. In a planned economy money must be handled as both constant and variable. Both attitudes, despite their inconsistency, must be institutionalized without discrediting each other. The second sort of contradiction arises with the problem of scarcity. The normal attitude toward economic events is that commodities and work are considered scarce if human needs are unsatisfied. In contrast, in the administration of the economy and of production, it seems more rational to orient ourselves, not to the scarcity of goods, but to the scarcity of consumers—to assume they are scarce in their role as spenders and are confronted with an apparent overflow of goods. Thus, the rationalization of economic decision-making rests upon a perversion of ordinary moral attitudes. This can occur because, however important decisions are here, economic decisions can be neutralized morally and politically and can take on a certain institutional stability. Here again it is evident how complex and evolutionarily improbable are the presuppositions underlying modern economic systems.

VIII

In conclusion, we shall return to our point of departure—the relation between the economy and society. Our thesis is that economic sociology can only be developed if its approach is overhauled and it sets out not from a concept of economic society but from a concept of the economy as a subsystem of society. This conceptual reorientation, as we indicated, not only leads to a better understanding of the economy itself, but also bears on the economy's relation to society. This relation can be seen as a problem for which there are different possible solutions, once we begin by distinguishing between the economy and society as different social systems.

The history of ideas and problems gives us an initial clue. Thinkers in the older European tradition thought of their society as politically, not economically, constituted. Only in modern times have there been increasing signs that the concept of society is becoming economic: e.g., apolitical utopias constructed on a religious and economic basis, moral approval of the desire for profit (avarice becomes a virtue), the reinterpretation of the scholastic concept of matter (it changes its sense from the indeterminate complexity of an object to the substrate from which men preserve and reproduce their existence through work), the early liberal reduction of all political programs to a single one—the distribution of economic goods, and (an example from the twentieth century) the idea of a "cultural lag" in a technically and economically progressive society. Not all of these developments have been accompanied by an adequate, say materialistic, theory of society. Instead (and this has some basis in reality), there has been a changed awareness of those problems which determine social development and must therefore be solved first. Thus, it is not by chance that the victory of the new economic conception of society over the ethical and political tradition took place under the sign of progress.

Sociology, although it does not work at this conceptual level,[27] can nevertheless reconstruct theoretically the problem-formulations and experiences contained in this tradition of thought. On the basis of a systems-theoretic approach, we can translate the thesis of political or economic society into the thesis of the *functional primacy* of the political or economic subsystem of society. Instead of a confusing theory about the essence or the origin of society we may look at system differentiation and functional relations in the total system. We may thus allow room for the variation of points of emphasis in society in the course of evolution. The rest depends upon whether we succeed in clarifying sufficiently the concept of functional primacy. Talcott Parsons, who has used the concept in an important passage (Parsons and Smelser 1956, p. 15f.; Parsons 1959a, p. 116f.), fails to clarify it sufficiently. The logical weakness of the concept lies in there being, in addition to primary functions, other equally necessary ones. The concept implies that a primary function does not exclude others. The classical framework in which this problem was introduced and handled and which Parsons himself still used was shaped by the concepts of whole, part, and hierarchy. If we think of a whole as consisting of parts we stumble upon the paradox that the parts taken individually do not add up to the whole. But that means that the whole itself must be a part of the whole.[28] In the past, this seems to have led to discussions about the *majores partes*, the part that represents the whole without being the whole itself.[29] In this way traditional European thought ended up with the idea of a hierarchically structured society in which the higher parts represent the whole and thus fulfill the goal of the whole and have the right to demand from the lower parts the means necessary to achieve the goal.

Functional primacy cannot be understood in terms of this assumed congruence among the dichotomies of whole/part, upper/lower, and end/means: i.e., as the primacy of the part that fulfills the end of the whole. Primacy as authority or domination might be plausible for political society but not for economic society. Such a concept of primacy would be too simple, too highly generalized for modern society. If instead we start with a theory of functional system-differentiation, the concept of primacy can be expressed as the preeminence of the problem with which the subsystem deals. The preeminence of this problem cannot be established at the level of the functionally specified subsystem itself. It does not follow from the "essence" of the economy that it is more important than politics, religion, or family. Our problem must be clarified from the viewpoint of the encompassing system of society itself. We shall then be able to answer the two questions of what the "preeminence of a problem" actually means (when it is no longer a matter of authority, privileges, the social rank of persons or groups) and why these problems become preeminent in society.

However, at the present stage of social theory we cannot answer these questions with any confidence. When we look at the classical formulation of the problems of politics and the economy, we notice the fact that the complexity of the economy is better and more highly structured than the complexity of politics. Although the traditional European goals of politics—the good life, the guarantee of peace and justice, the overcoming of the fear and need that arise by virtue of relations to other men—were quite abstract, the way they were carried out through authority and consensus was always in terms of concrete institutions. It was precisely this indeterminacy which led to a dependence upon tradition and a low variability in practice. In the economy, especially in the area outside the household (the division of labor, the distribution of goods), the opportunity arose of better structuring a higher complexity and thus subjecting it to a more rational decision-making process. In spite of the proclamation of a special *ratio status*, neither politics nor the law succeeded in working out a concept of rationality adequate to modern society.

If we think about this situation, we are led to the hypothesis that how social subsystems come to have functional primacy in the course of history is connected to their differing levels of complexity. *Functional primacy appears to fall to the subsystem that can be structured and differentiated from the rest of society with a higher complexity of its own.* By virtue of just such a higher complexity, ancient Greek thought argued for an ethical and political theory of society. Leaving behind the archaicism of race and despotically ruled households, each individual, able to choose rationally between good and bad, was supposed to manifest his humanity in political institutions. We now can see that the direction of social evolution has shifted to another subsystem, the economy, because in a similar way it handles and reduces a higher complexity. It domesticates not only space but also time.

At a higher level this concept of functional primacy can be justified by a functional conception of society as that social system which reduces the most extreme complexity, the complexity of the world with its infinite possibilities (Luhmann 1970a). The primacy falls to the subsystem that is most important for this function of society. Our hypothesis also agrees with the conception of social evolution as a movement that increases the complexity of society.

This idea is widespread in sociology, at least implicitly. Whatever the concrete causes, systems seem to emerge in the course of social evolution which link a higher complexity of what is possible with a higher selectivity in experience and action. Because of the advantage of such a combination, the movement toward increased complexity is virtually irreversible. These evolutionary successes presuppose functional system-differentiation; therefore not all subsystems participate in them in the same way. Many subsystems are functionally indispensable for a given level of social development. But that does not bear on the question of functional primacy.[30] Thus, the concept of functional primacy is not concerned with comparing the intrinsic importance of specific functions. Instead, it refers to the position of a subsystem in the total context of social evolution—namely, the position of that subsystem which by virtue of its own complexity and dynamics guides social development and delineates for other subsystems their domains of possibilities.

It should not, however, be assumed that this subsystem defines the totality of the evolutionary constraints for a society. We could develop, as a contrast, the concept of evolutionary bottlenecks. We might ask whether there exists enough love or democracy or social-scientific truths for further social development.

We must conclude with these sketchy and tentative ideas. They only indicate in what conceptual framework the concept of "economic society" must be replaced by that of "the economic system as a subsystem of society" and what implications and consequences we will then have to work through. This approach, not least because of the possible change in system-references that it implies, is quite complex and problematic, when measured against the plausibility of traditional approaches, against the possibilities for empirical verification, or against the premises by which decision theory can come to unambiguous conclusions. But in view of an increasingly complex reality, it becomes ever more necessary to bring our theories up to an adequate level of complexity. Science still is not the guiding system, but rather a bottleneck in social development. However, it can already anticipate attaining social primacy and can speculate about the conditions under which that could come to pass. It would have to become a social system that brings forth an adequate theory of society.

PART III

10

The Differentiation of Society

I. System Differentiation

The principal achievement of systems theory has been a recasting of the general framework within which systems are conceived and analyzed. General systems theory and cybernetics supplanted the classical conceptual model of a whole made out of parts and relations between parts with a model emphasizing the *difference* between systems and environments. This new paradigm made it possible to relate both the structures (including forms of differentiation) and processes of systems to the environment. It is worthwhile recalling this crucial discovery because of a regrettable but widespread tendency to neglect it. For example, the theory of ecosystems and research on "world models" both tend to conceive the system and its environment as a single encompassing system. As a result, attempts are made to forecast future system states on the basis of system variables alone, without considering obstacles or interferences that impinge from the outside.[1] Even formal efforts to define the concept of a system frequently ignore the fact that environments must necessarily be excluded from systems.[2]

This essay, however, will not explore the external environment of societal or even ecological systems. Its purpose is to use the distinction between system and environment for developing a theory of system differentiation that can be applied to society. We must assume at the outset some familiarity with the theories of Ashby and Parsons.[3] Both authors assert that, because of time, complex systems cannot afford to rely exclusively on one-to-one relations between external and internal events. Complex systems need time to process information and come up with apt responses. As a consequence, they must include at least some structures or parts not directly embroiled in determining specific reactions. If external events required everything to be changed at once, all complex systems would be eliminated. System differentiation, in fact, is a structural technique for solving the temporal problems of complex (i.e., time consuming) systems situated in complex environments.

This line of reasoning employs the distinction between system and environment only once—in reference to the total circumscribed system. It demonstrates the unavoidability of internal differentiation by pointing to the external environment. Afterward, however, it simply reverts to the old paradigm of a whole and its incorporated parts. The term "internal environment," so far as I can see, is only used to denote the subordinate components of the system. Internal analysis, therefore, becomes nothing more than the analysis of intersystem relations. Talcott Parsons, for example, locates the main task of his theory in the articulation and elaboration of conceptual models for describing interchanges between systems. But environments do not consist exclusively of various other systems. They also contain (and this is extremely important) the *chance* to seek or avoid relations with other systems. Equally significant facets of any environment are: forms of interdependence, temporal relations, the degree of reliable "normality," the frequency of surprise, and so forth. Environments have no clearly defined boundaries but only horizons that imply further possibilities while making it meaningless or inconvenient to pursue them indefinitely. In other words, the relevance of environments cannot be reduced to that of an encompassing supersystem or of a series of environing systems. And, of course, only if the concept of environment does *not* signify a larger system or set of systems is it meaningful to say that the concept of system presupposes the concept of environment and vice versa.

On the basis of these assumptions, we can conceive of system differentiation as a *replication, within a system, of the difference between a system and its environment.* Differentiation is thus understood as a reflexive and recursive form of system building. It repeats the same mechanism, using it to amplify its own results. In differentiated systems, as a result, we find two kinds of environment: the external environment common to all subsystems and a separate internal environment for each subsystem. This conception implies that each subsystem reconstructs and, in a sense, *is* the whole system in the special form of a difference between the subsystem and its environment. Differentiation thus reproduces the system in itself, multiplying specialized versions of the original system's identity by splitting it into a number of internal systems and affiliated environments. This is not simply a decomposition into smaller chunks but rather a process of growth by internal disjunction. (The political subsystem, for example, institutes a special way of conceiving society as an internal environment. It tries to organize and assess the political relevance of nonpolitical motives under the convenient heading "the public.") Structural changes affecting society at large, as a result, will have a decisive impact on this way of partitioning or parcelizing the whole. They will not necessarily have the same effect on the way the religious and the educational subsystems perceive changes in their respective environments. Compulsory school attendance and mass education are different environmental problems for the political system, for the economic system, for families, for the religious system, the medical system, and so on. To repeat the critical point: it is through the construction of diverse internal versions of the entire system (produced by disjoining subsystems and internal environments) that facts, events, and problems obtain a multiplicity of meanings in different perspectives.

The function of system differentiation can be described as *the enhancement of selectivity*, that is, the increase in available possibilities for variation or choice. Societies (at least modern society) can presuppose an infinite world. On this basis, they create a highly contingent and dynamic but nevertheless already domesticated internal environment which serves as a condition for the development of further social systems. The principal function of the all-encompassing system of society, therefore, is simultaneously to enlarge and reduce (i.e., to provide a prepatterned and orderly access to) the complexity of external and internal environments so that smaller systems will find enough substructure to support their higher selectivity or increased freedoms. This process continues at the level of subsystems. The same mechanism is repeated, and it creates highly specialized organizations and forms of interaction. The experience and action taking place in such a society must always rely on a complex network of selective boundaries that curtail open contingencies without obliterating them. Such structures make various expectations and actions highly probable in the present situation even though they are highly improbable from an evolutionary point of view. We can form stable expectations and rely on them. But this excludes the possibility of understanding the contingent selectivity or "chooseability" of experience and action as an "intended meaning." There is no way back to the *meaning* of originative experience in Husserl's sense (1954). Nor is there any plausible way to base systems theory on a Weberian concept of meaningful action.[4]

Actors in our society, of course, are conscious of this condition. We are all aware of the unsurveyable complexity of our world. For highly differentiated societies, in fact, the world can be meaningful only as an indeterminate horizon for further exploration. It cannot be conceived as a finite and bounded set of things and events (in the classical sense of a *universitas rerum* or *aggregatio corporum*). But social evolution did not start out from the assumption of such an indeterminate world. Initially, societies reacted to concrete environmental facts and generalized their conceptions of the world as correlates of social differentiation. The contingencies that could be safely admitted were enlarged only to the extent that societies could be sure of their capacity for making selections. As a result, conceptions of the world vary along with increasing system differentiation.[5] We must be careful to distinguish, in other words, genetic and functional perspectives. Only in highly complex societies can experiences of everyday life be articulated with the twin conceptions of an open world and structural self-selection.

II. Segmentation, Stratification, and Functional Differentiation

The evolution or modernization of society has often been described as a process of increasing system differentiation and pluralization. This statement is true but needs clarification. It would be difficult to compare all kinds of societies as to their degree of differentiation. What could serve as a common standard? In fact, societies are too heterogeneous for this sort of comparison because they incorporate distinct forms of differentiation. *Degrees* of differentiation (and, for that matter, degrees of complexity) are produced and mediated by *forms* of differentiation. And these forms of differentiation differ in the way they establish internal boundaries between subsystems and internal environments.

It is important for social evolution itself, as well as for the theoretical analysis of societies, that *only a few forms of differentiation have been developed.* It is difficult to adduce convincing theoretical reasons for this fact—reasons that would exclude the possibility of other forms. But apparently we can rely on the "Goldenweiser principle" (Goldenweiser 1937), which states that specific structural problems can have only a limited number of possible solutions. Even societies aware of the "social construction of reality" and which operate under the assumption that meaningful structures are contingent and subject to change cannot arbitrarily dream up new forms of differentiation. *The contingency of the world cannot be matched by a corresponding contingency in the process of differentiation.* Even if every institution could be changed, the society operating under such a premise would have to be satisfied with only a few forms of differentiation.

This limitation, it seems to me, results from the fact that system differentiation requires a combination of two dichotomies, both of which are asymmetrical: system/environment and equality/inequality. So far, three possible combinations have emerged: segmentation, stratification, and functional differentiation. Their combination, again, follows the Law of Limited Possibilities. It is sufficient, however, for the development of extremely complicated societies.

Segmentation differentiates society into *equal* subsystems. Equality, here, refers to principles of self-selective system formation. In archaic societies, these principles are "descent" or "residence" or a combination of both. Inequality results from a fortuitous disparity of environmental conditions. Inequality, at this stage, does not have a systematic function. Nevertheless, it is decisive for the evolutionary differentiation of societies.

Stratification differentiates society into *unequal* subsystems. It aligns the asymmetry of system/environment with that of equality/inequality. Equality thus becomes a norm regulating internal communication and inequality becomes a norm regulating communication with the environment. The Greek term *isonomia* (Mau and Schmidt 1964; Meier 1970) referred to the equality of citizens located within one stratum of society. These citizens successfully claimed to be (or to represent) the whole system. But *isonomia* presupposed inequality with respect to other strata of society. In other words, the class of citizens defined the internal environment of their society by means of "inequality." The citizenry depended on this category for their own identity and self-understanding.

Stratification, of course, requires an unequal distribution of wealth and power—or, to put it more generally, an unequal distribution of communication chances. It would be misleading, however, to focus exclusively on this aspect of inequality, to label it domination and exploitation, or to seek to justify it. Indeed, we can leave these games to bourgeois and Marxist sociologists. Equality is equally important, or even more important, as the principle defining the identity of subsystems. Stratification was initially a result of growth in a society's size and complexity. Under expanding conditions that excluded face-to-face or personal interaction between all members of society, social communication required "selective intensifiers." The premise of in-group equality, at this stage, facilitated access to a delimited set of partners. This became even more important when stratification could be used to cut across an incipient role differentiation. Here, again, we must distinguish between genetic and functional considerations. The evolution of stratification required an accidental and extrafunctional rise in the unequal distribution of wealth. It was also accompanied by some kind of symbolic discrimination of the social prestige of persons or clans.[6] In segmentary societies, these were "preadaptive advances." Only at a later stage of evolution did stratification perform its own specific function of integrating societies by fostering communication among members of the upper class.

We can, of course, always moralize about the problem of unequal distribution. But we cannot actually advance from unequal to equal distribution. The *moral* problem of equality and inequality is a problem inherent in stratified societies. It has been articulated in terms of a theory of justice, but it certainly cannot be "solved" in these terms. Moralizing has only secondary or attenuating functions—or, as some critics might say, ideological functions. The *structural* problem of stratified societies is that *the identification of subsystems requires a hierarchical definition of their environment in terms of rank order or equality/inequality.* Subsystems can maintain their identity and their boundaries only by defining the character of other subsystems. In this sense, the upper classes have to fuse their own identity with a hierarchical conception of the whole society. This conception (in turn) defines the proper places on the pecking order for all others.[7] Whether the lower strata accept or are even aware of this definition is an empirical question. They conform to it because they have no alternative. The structural problem of stratiform differentiation is that it limits the complexity of society. It can be institutionalized only if higher complexity cannot be attained for other reasons. As a result, an increase in aggregate wealth has a tendency to revolutionize stratified societies.[8]

If communication among equals, despite conditions that made it difficult, was the principal achievement of stratification, it is improbable that higher status groups would have communicated very often about the behavior and living conditions of the lower strata. Rightly or wrongly, this low-lying environment was taken for granted. Communication among members of the upper class did not function either to influence or adapt to it. There were, to be sure, complex household systems that mitigated this condition at the level of personal relations. But on the whole, lower strata have had a difficult time getting the attention of superiors and becoming the subject of influential communication. And their only means seems to have been conflict: social movements, peasant revolts, uproars.[9] This way of catching attention may have had decisive consequences for the development of society. But only rarely did it change society simply by triggering communication. The reforms of Solon were an exceptional case.

In both respects, with regard to the possible complexity of internal environments and with regard to social adjustment by means of communication, functional differentiation provides further possibilities.

Functional differentiation organizes communication processes around special functions to be fulfilled at the level of society.[10] Since all necessary functions have to be fulfilled and are interdependent, society cannot concede absolute primacy to any one of them. It has to use a second level of subsystem formation to institute a primacy of specific functions limited to a special set of system/environment relations. Salient examples are the political function of producing collectively binding decisions, the economic function of securing the satisfaction of future wants within enlarged temporal horizons and the religious function of "interpreting the incomprehensible." In these and in other cases, differentiation begins quite early as *a differentiation of roles*. It gains momentum only when at least two distinct roles organize their complementary expectations around a specific function—for example, clerics and laymen, politicians and the public, or teachers and pupils. This requires the emergence of special roles for receiving services. These roles are "boundary roles" in the sense that they have to transform nonpolitical relevance into political relevance (the public), noneconomic relevance into economic relevance (customers), nonreligious relevance into religious relevance (laymen), and so on. Only if this condition is fulfilled on a larger scale will functionally specialized communications become subsystems that orient their operations toward a specific common environment within society. They may then even resort to illogical dichotomies (e.g., state versus society, church versus society, or economic interest versus social interest) to articulate their relations with an environment that includes all other subsystems.[11] From this perspective, environment and society tend to merge.

Obviously, these conditions are more difficult to realize than either segmentation or stratification. Functional differentiation is the latest outcome of sociocultural evolution.

Functional differentiation once again shifts the distribution of equality and inequality. Functions have to be unequal, but the access to functions has to be equal, that is, independent of any relation to other functions. The functional subsystems, in other words, have to be unequal, but their associated environments have to be treated as environments of equals because nothing but function can justify discrimination. A functionally differentiated society, as a result, will become, or will have to pretend to be, *a society of equals* insofar as it is *the aggregate set of environments for its functional subsystems*. This explains why increasing functional differentiation, including the differentiation of economy, education, and science, led to a renewed emphasis on the normative ideal of "equality" in the eighteenth century (Dann 1975).

Compared with stratification, functional differentiation has two important advantages for the heightening of complexity. Functional subsystems do not depend on a complementary definition of their environment, nor do they dogmatically prescribe the status of their environment in relation to themselves. Each subsystem can tolerate an open and fluctuating environment so long as other subsystems fulfill their function. This condition requires, on the other hand, a constant selective adjustment by means of both influence on and adaptation to society's internal environment. Functional subsystems, therefore, are structurally required to process information about their environment. Unlike high status groups, they do not await exceptional provocations to do so.

By means of functional differentiation, a society can multiply the specificity of functional relations and, at the same time, multiply the openness of internal environments in relation to which subsystems fulfill their functions. Its subsystems can tolerate indifference toward everything except very special features of their respective environments. By specifying and institutionalizing functions, society *increases* its internal interdependencies. By loosening the structural complementarities of systems and environments and by providing for more and more indifference, society *decreases* internal interdependencies. It augments, in other words, internal dependencies and independencies at the same time. It attains a higher level of compatibility between dependencies and independencies.

We must be very careful in applying the system/environment schema and in analyzing the internal environments of functionally differentiated societies in order to see the crucial point: the relation of each single subsystem to society is not identical with the relation of each subsystem to its social environment; nor is this relation to the internal environment simply a set of intersystem relations. Therefore, society can use a highly diversified pattern of functional differentiation. This is because it can reduce its internal complexities by selective operations (which in all subsystems focus on corresponding environments).

III. Function, Performance, Self-reflection

When subsystems are unequal and their relevance for society is reduced to a special function, they can become "autonomous" in new ways. This results from the fact that each subsystem can now gear its selective operations toward three distinct system references: (1) toward the *system of society* in terms of its *function*; (2) toward *other subsystems* within society's internal environment in terms of *input and output performances*; and (3) toward *itself* in terms of *self-reflection.*

Orientation toward function gains its importance through a process of specification at the higher level of the encompassing society. The essential preconditions are sufficient size and adequate care for other functions. Orientation toward performance can be characterized by the fact that the input and output of each social sector has to be adjusted to the system/environment perspectives of other subsystems. Otherwise, such "performances" would not issue forth or would not be accepted. Fulfillment of function is not as such equivalent to adequate performance in intersystem relations. Furthermore, a self-reflective orientation becomes unavoidable if problems of continuity or discontinuity spring up and have to be solved by going back to a system's conception of its own identity. Their solution requires a history of the system that can be reconstructed as an exploration of concepts, problems, solutions, and idealizations. A history of this sort has a chance to accumulate only if society provides for specific system/environment relations at the level of subsystems.

It is crucial to recognize that these three system references (as well as the evaluative standards for successful function, performance, and self-reflection) are not identical. Even the social primacy of a specific function cannot serve as an integrative formula or minimal ethics for all system/environment relations. This is because, in a sense, the whole is less than the sum of its parts. In other words, functionally differentiated societies cannot be ruled by leading parts or elites as stratified societies (to some extent) could be. They also cannot be rationalized by means/ends chains as a technocratic conception would suggest. Their structural complexity can be adequately formulated only by models that take into account several system/environment references at once.

Functional differentiation requires sufficient capacity at the level of subsystems to differentiate and reintegrate function, performance, and self-reflection. This is the only way subsystems can attain operative autonomy as systems-in-their-environment. If they succeed, we can expect important consequences for the *temporal structures of society*. An orientation toward performance gives priority to the future. It requires the temporalization of the means/ends relation, doing away with the medieval distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic ends. Self-reflection, on the other hand, looks backward. It reinforces the identity of the system so that it can survive novel choices and innovations by reconstructing its *past history* as a consistent series of intentions and actions. The function of a subsystem, finally, can be used as a "mailing address" in communicative relations. Function, in other words, is a *present reality* that directs and justifies communications. Of course, these three different emphases do not exclude each other. No present is without a future and a past. But a differentiation between function, performance, and self-reflection at the operative level will separate temporal horizons. It will increase complexity-in-time and will put tension on temporal integration. The present, in this situation, assumes the specific function of mediating between very dissimilar past and future states. It is well known that conceptions of time changed drastically during the second half of the eighteenth century.[12] We have good reasons to suppose that this change was correlated with the increasing functional differentiation of modern society.

Increasing functional differentiation, of course, leads to different problems in different subsystems. A further analysis, as a result, will require a shift of focus toward particular subsystems. If we judge "the formulation and execution of binding decisions" to be the function of the political system, then it is obvious that fulfilling this function is necessary but that, at the same time, it cannot suffice as a performance for other subsystems. There has to be, in addition, sufficient care for a constant input of power resources and for the acceptance of political decisions as premises for subsequent behavior in the nonpolitical environment. Both input and output depend on the structures of environing systems. Attention to political performance in this sense may endanger, or at least will limit, the capacity to fulfill the chief function of politics. It will increase the proportion of undecidable issues. Furthermore, when operating in a changing environment, the political system has to provide for the coherence of its decisions over time. In traditional societies, this was an achievement of law. If, however, modern societies discriminate the political and the legal systems with respect to different functions and, at the same time, make it possible to change law by means of political decisions, the legal order will no longer furnish sufficient guarantees for coherent decision-making in the political system. There then has to be a new kind of political self-reflection focusing on the option of continuing or discontinuing the political premises of decision-making. Of course, such self-reflection cannot be reduced to a choice between progressive and conservative convictions.

Other subsystems may develop similar differentiations and similar tensions. The system of scientific research pursues the function of discriminating clearly between true and false propositions.[13] It elaborates on this function by methodological rules. But methodological standards can be endlessly refined and, nevertheless, do not guarantee performance. Applied research, in order to be useful within a reasonable time span, may require healthy restrictions on methodological scruple and even bold shortcuts that, one hopes, will be tolerated within the scientific community. And finally, neither methodology nor usefulness amounts to theoretical relevance. Results will not necessarily solve or dissolve basic theoretical problems. Theoretical issues link each of the sciences to its own tradition, and it is only in terms of theory that the scientific system can reflect on its own identity and may choose, on this basis, either continuity or discontinuity. Here again, we cannot expect a natural harmony but, at best, stabilized and accepted tensions between the function, performance, and self-reflection of science. And, obviously, only science itself can cope with these tensions by differentiating its operations and by shifting the focus of research. This requires high complexity and a high degree of specification. These will neutralize the effect on the system of a one-side emphasis either on theoretical reflection or applied research or methodology.

In terms of its function, the economic system has to preserve sufficiently generalized capacity (or liquidity) to extend the temporal horizon of need satisfaction, i.e., to guarantee the satisfaction of future needs. To be useful to noneconomic systems, it has to produce goods and services. Its form of self-reflection has abandoned the old emphasis on "profit" (in the sense of noncontractual, nonsocial, and therefore purely economic income) for a concern with "growth," and may have to change again by taking into account problems of ecological balance. The educational system oscillates between liberal education (reflecting thereby on its own identity), and vocational education (performance). Its function might be described as the socialization of individuals as an adequate environment for future social systems.

We could, but shall not, continue to itemize these highly debatable assumptions. The argument is that a general pattern emerges at the level of subsystems when functional differentiation becomes the primary form of social differentiation. Functional differentiation requires a displacement of problems from the level of society to the level of subsystems. This is not simply a process of delegation or decentralization of responsibilities and not simply a factoring out of means for the ends of society. The displacement integrates each specific function into a new set of system/environment references and produces types of problems and solutions that would not, and could not, arise at the level of the encompassing system.

Normative as well as classical functionalist reasoning implied that there "exists" a definite set of problems at the level of society and that these problems "have to be solved" if society is to survive. However, a closer look at the internal problems of functionally differentiated societies shows that we cannot take for granted that every function has the same chance of becoming a catalytic principle for subsystem formation within the internal environment of these societies. Primacy at the level of subsystems means different things for different functions. Forms and urgencies of temporal integration of systems and environments differ depending on the relation between function and performance. Subsystems are not equal in their capacity to differentiate function, performance, and self-reflection. There is a widespread deficiency with respect to self-reflection (which is, however, more obvious in politics than in science). Subsystems, therefore, differ in their tendency to use either function or performance as a substitute for self-reflection. And there is at least one subsystem (art) which tends to use self-reflection as a substitute for function and performance. In other words, we must accept the conclusion that *functional differentiation itself has a selective impact on functions.* It may initiate processes of growth around specific functions and inhibit the development of others. Like any form of differentiation, functional differentiation is one of the factors that determines the outcome of evolution.

IV. Evolutionary Perspectives

The conceptual framework outlined above sets forth the limited possibilities of system differentiation. For expository purposes, it was necessary to isolate the three basic forms of differentiation and to focus on them in turn. We compared segmentation, stratification, and functional differentiation using the dichotomies of system/environment and equality/inequality. This may have suggested that societies are either segmentary, stratified or functionally differentiated. But reality, of course, is much more complex.

This triadic typology, in fact, referes only to the *primary scheme* of differentiation. Within the traditional framework of wholes and parts societies were characterized by reference to their *partes maiores* or forms of rulership. The system/environment approach, by contrast, characterizes societies by reference to their primary pattern of differentiation. It replaces the classical political theory of society, which still survives in various elitist or pluralist conceptions, by sociological analysis. The most important structural choice, then, concerns the way in which the dominant scheme of differentiation defines not only subsystems but, above all, society's internal environment as a condition for further differentiation.

The initial way in which society is divided up defines the conditions and limitations of further differentiation. Forms of differentiation do not exclude—they may even presuppose—each other, but there are limits of compatibility. Segmentary societies can develop stratification only in the form of "pyramidal organization" (Southall 1956). They separate, to a certain extent, situations and family roles with respect to function, but they seem unable to organize enduring social systems around specific functions.

Stratified societies have to use segmentation because their strata consist of equal families, not of individuals. Stratification, then, depends crucially on segmentation, which it can use only at the second level of differentiation defining the equality of sub-subsystems and the internal environment of status groups. Stratification is also compatible with functional differentiation, certainly at the level of special roles, but also of role systems—for example, bureaucracies, religious temples, or labor organizations. It channels access to these roles. It approaches its limits, however, if subsystems define their clientele in universalistic terms. Society as a whole shifts in the direction of functional differentiation if society introduces compulsory education for everyone, if *every* person (whether nobleman or commoner, Christian, Jewish or Muslim, infant or adult) has the same legal status,[14] if "the public" is provided with a political function as an electorate, if every individual is acknowledged as choosing or not choosing a religious commitment, and if everybody given the necessary resources can buy anything and pursue any occupation. The universalistic symbolic codes were "preadaptive advances" that prepared the way for these changes as early as the Middle Ages.[15] The changes were finally accomplished when the whole population was split, regardless of ascribed status, into role sets corresponding to the functional differentiation of leading roles. These, then, became organized with respect to their particular "clientele environments" to which they had to adjust more than the old status system could allow. This change in role relationships restabilized "universalistic" orientations and transformed them into an almost irreversible evolutionary achievement. Henceforth, universalistic symbolic codes were no longer solely a cultural or literary phenomenon; they became tied to the necessities of everyday life. They formulated (for different subsystems in different ways) the structural prerequisite of the "inclusion" of everyone into every functional domain (Marshall 1965; Parsons 1971, pp. 92ff; 1974).

Functional differentiation, again, depends for many of its functions on segmentary differentiation within functional subsystems. The most spectacular example, of course, is the political system. Even the global system of world society has yet to change the fact that politics needs a territorial basis for decision-making, especially if it is supposed to maximize consensus and democratic rule. Thus, the political system of world society is divided into political states not only in the sense of a more or less obsolete historical "residue" but also apparently as a prerequisite for functional specification.

Obviously enough, stratification also survives—much to the distress of bourgeois and Marxist intellectuals. But, adapting to the predominance of functional differentiation, it changes its form and content. Having been dethroned as the primary pattern of differentiation, stratification turns into a (more or less) open class structure that is continually reproduced by the effects of functional differentiation. "Capitalist" and "socialist" countries do not differ in this respect. They do differ, however, in the extent to which bureaucratic organizations are involved in the reproduction of stratification.

Two essential features emerge from this discussion, presenting a kind of transitive relation or even Guttman scale between the forms of differentiation: stratification provides more complex environments for subsystems than segmentation, and functional differentiation provides more complex environments for subsystems than stratification. Furthermore, stratification has a higher, though not unlimited, compatibility with other forms of differentiation than segmentation, and functional differentiation has a higher, but not unlimited, compatibility with other forms of differentiation than stratification. Thus, the degree of compatibility seems to depend on the complexity of internal environments.

These considerations are not meant to "explain" sociocultural evolution. They do not represent a theory of evolution. Even perfect Guttman scales could not explain change or the reasons for a certain historical sequence.[16] A theory of system differentiation cannot explain why, historically, the chances to differentiate subsystems and to fill up their environments with complexity have been used at all. There is no general law, such as the eighteenth century assumed, governing transitions from simple to complex forms. A theory of evolution will probably never succeed as a theory that explains later states as a consequence of earlier states within the "process of universal history."[17] It may be possible, however, following the Darwinian tradition, to work out a theory of structural changes brought about by the differentiation and interplay of distinct mechanisms for variation, selection, and stabilization (Campbell 1965; Luhmann 1975b). In this case, system differentiation can be understood as one of the factors of evolution, stabilizing its results and thus laying down conditions for further evolution.

V. Preconditions and Side Effects

The various forms of differentiation rely upon diverse structural preconditions. They also have distinct side effects. These preconditions and side effects are important—not so much as prerequisites for the "survival" of society but as a structural framework for the continuation of social evolution. We shall indicate some possibilities for further analysis with respect to (1) system boundaries, (2) size, (3) temporal structures, and (4) levels of expectation. Our analysis will focus on societies that have functional differentiation as their primary scheme, that is, on modern societies.

1. Any form of differentiation presupposes boundaries or "lines of demarcation." Boundaries delimit society's internal environment and establish selective relations between internal and external environments. They do not forestall and they may even encourage traffic, cooperation, and conflict across the borders. The form boundaries take will therefore define the kind of external relations that appear advantageous or dangerous. The classical Chinese conception, distinguishing civilization from external barbarian countries, seems to give priority to cultural and military considerations;[18] whereas the European notion of frontiers differentiating legal and political systems[19] tends to politicize external relations. Conversely, forms of differentiation affect boundary requirements. Increasing functional differentiation led to a divergence of demands and selection rules for the outer boundary of societies. Political and legal systems had to insist on clearly defined territorial borders in order to attach decisions to rules.[20] Religious and economic systems, then, were encouraged to look across political frontiers for

their specific clientele. Their claims could be suppressed so long as their problems could be solved by traveling monks, merchants, or occasional political expeditions. This condition changed, however, when the structure of these subsystems became increasingly dependent on processes of exchange with what politically had to be treated as their environment. Then, pressures increased to extend the outer boundaries of society and to relax their political definition. Otherwise, even decisive events in the context of religious, economic, or scientific processes would have had to be located *outside* the system! When functional differentiation became the primary pattern of society, boundary problems could no longer be solved by travel or by attributing events to individual actors. The nineteenth-century idea of individual capitalists ruthlessly exploiting world resources and getting legal and political support from their national states was already anachronistic. Territorial societies fused irresistibly into one global society because some of their most important functional subsystems had expanded that far and could no longer accept narrower boundaries. Since political systems could not follow, they had no other choice then to try to bring world-interdependent processes of scientific and economic development and of mass communication and opinion-change under local political control. Hence, regional differences were transformed into different degrees of participation within the framework of one global society. As a result, we now have a problem of "underdeveloped countries." It is, after all, a consequence of functional differentiation that the boundaries of society shifted toward the extreme—encompassing, finally, all possible social communication. They constitute, today, a social system without historical precedent: a new type of society. And this changes the prospect of sociocultural evolution in the direction of highest improbability: further evolution can only be the evolution of one unique system.

2. Of course, extending boundaries is one way to increase the size of a system but by no means the only way. We must therefore discuss size as a separate problem. The concept of "system size" refers to the number of its elements. The interrelations between these elements constitute the system. The advantage of size does not lie in a capacity to actualize all possible interrelations but in the *chance* provided to choose the important ones.[21] Increase in

size, therefore, means increase in "selectivity" or opportunity for choice among alternatives. Size obtrudes selectivity on a system, and the increased selectivity (and not the sheer number of elements) has to be matched by appropriate forms of differentiation. Selectivity operates in terms of equality and inequality. Therefore, stratification requires enlarged size and produces more selectivity than segmentation, as does functional differentiation in comparison with stratification. Functional differentiation provides for a system with the largest number of elements and, therefore, with the highest selectivity or greatest potential for choosing among a variety of special relations. It definitely excludes a completely direct interdependence between all elements.[22] With respect to problems of increasing size, sociological theory has had the choice between demographic and communication variables.[23] The framework I am proposing tries to integrate both. Demographic variables refer to a growth of the population integrated into one society. From our point of view, these are *external* variables because persons as concrete psycho-organic units belong to the environment of systems of social communication. Only communication variables belong to *internal* processes of social systems. Sufficient population size has to be recognized as an important external condition for the number of communicative acts. But it can be used for intensifying communication only if appropriate communicative techniques are available; and it can, in part, be replaced by communicative techniques. A country with a low population density may have a high density of communication and vice versa.

Highly dense communication has developed, roughly speaking, in three steps: from animal communication to language, to writing, and to mass distribution. Each step presupposes a sufficient population as an environmental precondition and responds to it by enlarging the number and intensifying the selectivity of communicated messages. The improvement of communication channels (by superadding more powerful means) increases, in turn, the population a society can integrate. Finally, the extended size of the system stabilizes the required communication channels and techniques as almost irreversible evolutionary achievements.

It is in this sense that evolution has brought about a single system of world society that relies on functional differentiation and on mass communication. This world society would fall apart if structural changes reversed either the primary pattern of differentiation or the system of mass communication. This means, on the other hand, that the system of world society has to pay the costs resulting from its structural development. Mass communication is not simply a better solution for communication problems. It has a powerful impact on almost all subsystems, limiting the ways in which they can fulfill their functions.

Mass communication is not communication in the usual sense, intended to change opinions or influence action. It may do this or it may not, but its real impact on society involves time: as soon as information or opinions are published, common knowledge has to be taken for granted, and actions have to be based on imputed knowledge, whether opinions are really changed or not (Luhmann, 1975e). Thus, mass communication continually outruns its own immediate effects and speeds up reactions in a way that may or may not be compatible with a "serious" fulfilling of functions. In other words, the *social* "taking into account" of what others are supposed to know already changes the *temporal* dimension of experience and action. It is not so much the supposed uniformity of opinions as it is the shrinkage of temporal horizons that restricts the range of possibilities available in other subsystems. Thus, a plea for political control over mass communications may be less a plea for consensus than a plea for retaining an open and encouraging future.

3. Functional differentiation exposes subsystems to a highly complex internal environment. It attenuates shared beliefs, reducing them to highly generalized symbolic "meanings" or locating them in specific situations of daily life that change as partners change. To a large extent, as a consequence, common assumptions about an enduring present reality have to be replaced by a succession of different events and actions. Thus, complexity is temporalized.

As research in the history of ideas shows, notions about time and conceptions of temporal horizons change in tandem.[24] In the early seventeenth century, the process began (and this is highly significant) with a change in the concept of the present. The present was reduced to an instant without inherent duration. It was said to depend on secondary causes and human effort for its preservation. This seems to register the loss of common understanding mentioned above and made apparent by religious wars, economic fluctuations, and a geographic and scientific extension of the idea of the world. Only during the second half of the eighteenth century was an attempt made to change the temporal horizons of the past and the future accordingly, reconstructing the present as a turning point (or even as the moment of decision) between a highly dissimilar past and future. Structures, then, became temporalized as nonarbitrariness in the sequence of events.

The transformation of European society from a stratified into a functionally differentiated society was initiated during the same two centuries. The covariation of temporal structures and forms of social differentiation does not seem to be a spurious correlation. It can be explained by a theory of differentiation focusing on the increasing complexity of internal environments and on its consequences for integration and intersystem communication. Stated in slightly different terms, functional differentiation leads to a condition in which the *genesis of* problems and the *solution to* problems fall asunder. Problems can no longer be solved by the system that produces them. They have to be transferred to the system that is best equipped and specialized to solve them. There is, on the level of subsystems, less autarchy and self-sufficiency but higher autonomy in applying specific rules and procedures to special problems. This means that interdependencies have to be mediated by time. Functionally differentiated societies need more time but have less time available than older societies. Their history, as well as their future, is much more complex and contingent than that of any previous society. Nevertheless, time horizons relevant for orienting experience and action seem to shrink.[25] As a consequence, we observe increasing time pressures (and correspondingly pressureless leisure time) in everyday life. And "appointments" are given priority over "values" (Luhmann, 1971b).

4. Time pressures have a special impact on structure. They lead to a faster rate of structural change—a well known characteristic of modern society. Moreover, they affect the way structures can be identified as expectations in everyday life. This rather neglected topic needs further elaboration.

Everyday life is structured by reciprocal expectations.[26] It does not presuppose, however, a clear and unambiguous definition of one unit of expectation distinct from all others. Expectations are evoked by context and combine into clusters. It is only under the pressure of disappointments and suggested changes that expectations are forced to accept either a cognitive or a normative status, depending on whether they are supposed to be changed in the face of contradicting events or to be stubbornly maintained as counterfactually valid (Luhmann 1972a, pp. 40ff). And it is only this forced-choice situation of changing or not changing expectations that compels a determining of the point of view that identifies the unit that has to be changed or not changed. We have to know, after all, what is at stake before we are able to decide about dropping or preserving expectations.

Expectations of human behavior can be identified by *values*, by *programs* (norms or goals), by *roles*, or by the *persons* to whom they refer. These different levels of identification can be ordered on a scale from highly abstract to highly concrete. Since expectations are shaped and used in concrete situations, these different levels imply each other and need not be distinguished if no problems appear. The exchange of greetings and small talk between friends may be expected in the following ways: as a value, as conditioned by a normative rule, as part of the role of a friend, or (quite simply) as the behavior of a person whose name and biography we know. We do not have to decide which level is appropriate. But, as soon as expectations have to be denied or changed, it becomes important to seek out appropriate levels of contrast. This differentiation compensates for the indeterminateness inherent in negations: it directs, in a way, the search for alternatives or surrogates.

For these reasons, we have to expect an increasing differentiation of values, programs, roles, and personal identities if the functional differentiation of society speeds up processes of denial, rejection, and change. Expectations, then, have to be changed frequently at appropriate levels, and their preservation, too, requires identification with respect to possible change. Goals may have to be changed while values are maintained, and persons may switch roles. If we look at out present society, we find that its structural complexity is elaborated primarily at the levels of programs and roles. These middle levels sustain multiplicity and change whereas values become ideologies and persons become individuals. Values, then, become specialized in assuring enough consensus to initiate communication and to bridge any alteration in programs or roles. Only modern society needs a concept of value. Persons, on the other hand, guarantee a continuity of concrete expectations in spite of highly individualized cognitive and motivational structures. Only modern society cultivates and supports the social relevance of individuals. Ideological values and individualized persons are both possible because the structural burden is distributed on several levels and can be organized and adapted in the form of programs and roles on which values as well as persons depend. On the other hand, we can tolerate the contingency of programs and roles because we can transcend them in two directions, toward abstract values and toward concrete persons.

Besides time pressures and problems concerning the temporal integration of the past and the future, the way expectations can be identified and maintained or changed has an important impact on perspectives and moods in everyday life without being recognized as having it. Stratified societies could provide for conceptions of the "good life" patterned after the aspirations and *modus vivendi* of the higher strata. Functionally differentiated society continues to reproduce faded pictures of life in high society, but social structure and motivation are now connected by other mechanisms. These have to be more abstract and more situationally specific at the same time. Expectations have to be validated in a relative way, by reference to the systems they support or to decisions "subject to change without further notice." This situation can be described as a dissociation of social integration and system integration.[27] It can be explained only as a tradeoff problem of functional differentiation.

VI. Systems Theory and the Theory of Evolution

Classical approaches to systems theory, using the paradigm of a whole and its parts, did not merely tend to ignore the structural relevance of environments for systems. They excluded, by these conceptual limitations, developmental perspectives as well. The result was a theoretical cleavage separating theories of order from theories of development, statics from dynamics, and interest in structures from interest in process.[28] The respective theories were erected side by side, generating abstract controversies about whether structure or process was the fundamental reality of social life.

The system/environment framework outlined above does not offer a final decision on these issues. It does not pretend to be an axiomatic-deductive theory from which functional requirements of order, as well as explanations of change, can be derived by logical procedure. It accepts, at least provisionally, the difference between the conceptual frameworks of systems theory and the theory of evolution. Given this position, which is, in a sense, the historical situation of sociology today, the task can only be to increase the complexity of both conceptual frameworks in order to prepare for better possibilities of integration. We may even rationalize the logical deficiencies of this approach by stating that only a plurality of *independent* conceptualizations may stimulate research on interesting (nontautological) interdependencies.[29]

After Darwin, the theory of evolution treats a specific mode of structural change by distinguishing between mechanisms for variation, selection, and stabilization.[30] Without losing its own conceptual coherence, it can dismiss the old notion of a causal or "developmental" process of universal history as a self-explanatory unit.[31] This change of paradigm pulls the rug out from under the Marxist notion of a unity of theory and praxis. It provides, on the other hand, for better chances of integrating the theory of evolution and the theory of society. The theory of organic evolution, at least, strongly suggests that systems theory can help to define and characterize the different mechanisms of evolutionary change.

The Darwinistic approach, in other words, replaces the notion of a directional and historical sequence of changes from simple to complex states by a distinction between mechanisms necessary for the use of chance in structural change. It is the higher complexity of this theory that increases the interdependencies between the theory of evolution and the theory of systems, provided that the theory of systems itself achieves adequate complexity. The same holds true for the reverse perspective. If we conceive of systems as open-systems-in-environments, structural changes have to presuppose noncoordinated events in systems and environments. Noncoordinated events are contingencies in themselves both with respect to their coincidence and their conjunctive causality. The contingent coincidence of contingencies (and this is a plausible definition of "chance") may lead to structural changes given the conditions stated by the theory of evolution. It is the higher complexity of both theories and the coordinated change of paradigms in both areas that increases the prospect for theoretical integration.

This is, of course, a very formal way of stating possibilities for scientific research. The signpost indicating the road to concretization can be found if we go back to the distinction between outer and inner differentiation. Outer or primary differentiation is the general precondition for evolution as such at any level of physicochemical, organic, or sociocultural evolution. The boundaries of systems duplicate causal chains in the sense that single events in a system's environment can have different effects in the environment and in the system. Minimal discontinuities, therefore, may increase over time as they differentiate reactions.

The same mechanism works within systems.[32] Moreover, internal differentiation fulfills one of the evolutionary functions since it provides the mechanism of stabilization. Systems within systems reproduce increasingly improbable behavior patterns and problem solutions and maintain evolutionary accomplishments (but also nonfunctional, or even dysfunctional, traits or residues) within a zone of indifference to the fluctuations of outer and inner environments. It this is true, forms of internal differentiation can be supposed to affect evolution. Segmentation, stratification, and functional differentiation are not merely different (but functionally equivalent) ways of retaining and reproducing evolved traits. In doing this, they affect the interplay of the evolutionary mechanisms. For these mechanisms are not simply a list of additional requirements that have to be met to bring about evolution. They are interdependent functions in the sense that the way in which one of these functions is fulfilled influences the range of possibilities available to the others. Thus, functional differentiation increases and differentiates the horizon of possibilities accessible to each subsystem. It stimulates variation and raises the requirements for selective operations to an extent that would be incompatible with any other form of retentive stabilization. It thereby accelerates evolution; and this again limits the range of possible innovations that can be retained. Under conditions of extreme functional differentiation, structural changes begin to outrun each other without having enough time to settle down and explore their best possibilities. At this point, speed itself becomes the predominant factor in selection.

These remarks are not meant to be a description or even an explanation of the state of modern society. They remain on the level of general theory. They indicate, however, that important combinational gains could be achieved if the conceptual frameworks of systems theory and the theory of evolution could be revised and reintegrated. And these combinatorial gains might turn out to be the decisive factor linking general theory as it was practiced in the "grand tradition" with historical and empirical research.

11

Systems Theory, Evolutionary Theory, and Communication Theory

I

Scientific breakthroughs have both immanent and external origins. Advances in theory are occasioned by the problems, conceptions, and disputable premises of pre-existent theories as well as by supplementary encounters with reality. This much is universally true. In the special case of social theory, the object under investigation is an evolving system, liable to further evolutionary development. As a result, the growth of knowledge in this area is additionally complex. Even the twofold dependence of social theories on themselves and on their object domain is continually changing. Modifications in the relationship between transformations in society and transformations in social theory can be studied in turn. Indeed, such modifications *must* be studied whenever the universality or the foundations of social theory are questioned. This means that the theory of society, if it is to consider social evolution, must be reflexive, that is to say, it must also reflect upon its own historical emergence and status as a theory.

Dialectical theories have no monopoly on self-reflexivity. Significantly enough, "dialectics" originated in connection with a technical philosophical problem concerning the simultaneous "identity and nonidentity" of knowledge and its object—or, historically formulated, in connection with the necessity of an unknowable thing-in-itself. The celebrated foundationalist idea of self-referential negation was articulated on this basis. Of course, we cannot adequately discuss this difficult topic here.

At any rate, I concede that "dialectics" produced the earliest reflexive theory. What disturbs me about dialectical theories today, nevertheless, is their routine narrowness, their insufficient and undefined complexity, and their overhasty fixation on a few points of view from which "dialecticians" purport to get univocal results by applying negation. Whether or not you share my discomfort, you will probably be tempted to canvass alternatives.

Those "external" or exogenous factors mentioned above lead to the same conclusion. The bourgeois society studied by classic theorists (such as Comenius, Hobbes, Kant, Marx, or Kelsen) has undergone a series of unmistakable transformations. For instance, the "European epoch" of globally expanding bourgeois society has now come to an end. We are confronted with its historical aftermath, with the social conditions it created and bequeathed to us. And we face the choice of perpetuating or discontinuing institutions that once contributed to the rise of today's world society. This is the case in politics as well as in the economy, in law and in education as well as in science. How can this continuation or discontinuation be made theoretically intelligible (not to advance pretentious claims about prognosis and planning)?

Viewed from a historical and comparative perspective, the classic theorists of bourgeois society seem to have been spellbound by the unaccustomed functional autonomy possessed by the various sectors, spheres, or subsystems of modern society. Each of these theorists, in fact, tended to study society from a single distinctive standpoint. As examples, we can again name Comenius for education, Hobbes for politics, Kant for the theory of knowledge, Marx for the economy, and Kelsen for law. Today, by contrast, we would prefer a theoretical apparatus that can help us keep such limited perspectives and "functional primacies" under control and can ensure that they are viewed as relative and partial. Indeed, one of our most pressing questions is this: should we continue the hazardous autonomy or self-regulation of social subsystems?

The theoretical framework we are searching for, I believe, can be constructed largely from a set of previous theories, ones that have *not* been parochially affixed to single social domains such as politics or the economy. At any rate, the theories I am thinking of provide a sufficient foundation upon which to build. We must, of course, reformulate problems and consolidate incongruous starting points in a new fashion. On the basis of a few strategically chosen "moves," however, we soon arrive at new theoretical constellations that are already too far-reaching to be easily surveyed.

I shall now try to explain what I have in mind by considering three theoretical domains that are usually handled separately. I shall also attempt to characterize the new (or composite) type of social theory that emerges here on the basis of some working experiences and conjectures. The three approaches I have in mind are systems theory, evolutionary theory, and communication theory.

II

(1) Traditional theory conceived complex systems as "wholes" made out of "parts." The basic idea was that the *order* of the whole accounts for qualities the isolated parts could never possess on their own. Recent systems theory, as I see it, has abandoned this traditional approach by introducing an explicit reference to the environment. The concept of an environment does not merely imply that something else exists outside the system being studied. It is not a question of distinguishing between the "here" and the "elsewhere." The novel thesis, rather, runs as follows: the structures and processes of a system are only possible in relation to an environment, and they can only be understood if considered in this relationship. This is the case since only by reference to an environment is it possible to distinguish (in any given system) between what functions as an element and what functions as a relation between elements. Exaggerating slightly, we can even say that a system *is* its relation to its environment, or that it *is* the difference between system and environment.

These formulations make clear that systems are objects that generate and regulate self-implicating relations. Georg Simmel, in his

"Excursus on the Problem: How Is Society Possible?" (1971, pp. 6–22), claimed that it was relevant for the theory of knowledge that society (in contrast to nature as Newton and Kant conceived it) is an object itself capable of producing relations. Marx's concept of "form" has the same implication. As a consequence, relations cannot automatically be understood as achievements of the knowing subject or as conditions for the possibility of knowledge. The same holds true for self-referential relations. Sociology, in other words, is faced with self-reflexive relations within its object-domain and not only in its own thinking. An adequate social theory must therefore be able to exhibit and cope with the self-referential structures of its object (Hejl 1974). As a theory, it cannot disregard the fact that its statements about system structures or system processes must always refer to the difference between a system and its environment. This difference, in turn, cannot be conceived apart from the structures that endow a system with structural autonomy. The advance from a traditional to a modern theory of systems (that is, the critique of the old idea of a self-sufficient whole that confers "perfection" on its parts) hinges precisely on the development of self-referential concepts.

(2) The same can be said about the second research area: the theory of evolution.

In the nineteenth century, despite Darwin, evolution was typically conceived as a macrohistorical and lawlike causal process. This conception did not survive criticism and was gradually shorn of all its initial features. Repudiated were the ideas of the necessity and unilinearity of the process, the idea of its continuity and irreversibility, and finally all characterization of the process as a movement from the simple to the complex (which presupposes a first beginning and a final end). Evolution, it turns out, is not a "process" at all. As a result, present-day sociologists must completely rework the concept, taking their clue from Darwin.

Darwin's theory, first of all, describes several evolutionary functions: variation, selection, and the retention or stabilization of inheritable species-specific characteristics. These functions are accomplished by a variety of mechanisms. Evolution can thus be redefined to signify every structural transformation resulting from the differentiation and the collaboration of these mechanisms.

Whether or not evolution is a historical "movement" or "process," it can be characterized by reference to the way it produces itself.

Here again we encounter the problem of self-implication. Earlier theories relegated the self-implication of the historical process to its beginning (this is what we find, for example, in the doctrine of "seminal forces" or in the doctrine of Creation) and thus bound themselves to history (Meyer 1914; Jacob 1970). Likewise, in the traditional European theory of learning, the concept of experience (*empeiria*) presupposed the concept of "already having learned" as a condition for the possibility of learning (Buck 1969). Recent evolutionary theory merely gives the old problem of self-implication a new form. It explains evolution through the fact that mechanisms for variation, for the selection of useful solutions, and for stabilization are differentiated and allotted to distinct subsystems. And, in turn, the fact that this is possible is explained through evolution, that is, through earlier phases of evolution. The recent theory of social evolution, in other words, is a self-referential theory not only in its assumptions about "origins," but also in its general conceptual framework. It is a theory about the evolution of evolution.

(3) Finally, a precisely parallel claim can be made about the third research domain: communication theory. As is generally recognized, we possess not merely the capacity to speak, but also the capacity to speak about language itself. With the help of language in other words, we can communicate about communication (See Frey 1965; Garfinkel and Sacks 1970; and Habermas 1971b). This is an incontrovertible feature of linguistic communication. We can advance beyond this rather trite descriptive claim by asking about the advantages or functions of such reflexivity. It appears to be advantageous, in point of fact, because communication always presupposes a situation of "double contingency."[1] Through ordinary communicative processes, the choices of one individual are conveyed to another. When understood, these choices can either be accepted or rejected. It is *only* because this is the case (and because all communicating partners are aware of it and can communicate about it) that interlocutors can also, and must be able to, communicate about communication when the need arises.

Here too, in other words, a theory adequate to the meaning and structure of communicative behavior must incorporate self-referential concepts. Just as in systems theory and evolutionary theory, moreover, it is not a question here of one fact among others, of an optional subject matter that could just as easily be ignored. We are not concerned with a system's relation to its environment alongside numerous other structures and processes. Nor are we interested merely in the beginning of evolution, nor in one eccentric way of speaking among others. In all these cases, we are concerned with the underlying principle according to which the subject matter itself is constituted.

III

A complicating factor has now been introduced into each of the three principal domains of classical social theory. As a result, the theories have become self-referential in their very foundations. I cannot here discuss what this might mean logically or methodologically. In any case, these theories, when fundamentally restructured in relation to themselves, attain a greater independence from one another. Parsons tried to define evolution exclusively in his own "structural-functional" terms (i.e., with concepts such a differentiation, integration, and adaptation or adaptive capacity).[2] This is no longer possible. As the independence between theories increases, so do possibilities for combinatory gains. Indeed, we can even expect an important advance in understanding if we succeed in recombining these "autonomous" theoretical domains in a new way.

Every theory in which self-reference plays a foundational role has this problem: it cannot be made precise or unequivocal by logical and empirical means alone. For example, inconsistencies between propositions which are theoretically possible can no longer be straightened out on the basis of the object itself, by referring to objectively fixed features. This was, incidentally, the epistemological problem from which dialectical theory began (Hartmann 1973). Nevertheless, exactness can be achieved by introducing mutually *limiting* relations *between* the single theoretical domains, that is, by promoting collaborative exchanges between self-referential conceptual approaches. This occurs to the extent that each single theory succeeds in limiting the possibility for making statements in other theories. A good example here is the way that analyses within the theory of evolution are interwoven with insights drawn from systems theory or communication theory, while, at the same time, the latter must apply premises taken from evolutionary theory whenever they restrict the validity of their generalizations to specific stages of social development.

This combinatory or compositive style of theorizing has, consequently, the same "reference problem" as dialectical thinking, that is to say, the problem of limiting the employment of negation for the sake of reciprocal determination. But it handles this problem in a different way. As a result, the theory of knowledge and empirical research reconverge. The decisive questions now become: How are these various theories related to one another? What unifies them? How must a theory that integrates them be constructed?

If we simultaneously throw three stones into a fountain, there soon appear incalculably intricate relations as the ripples intersect. In the case of social theory, such bisectings and overlappings are unavoidable. No matter how abstractly formulated are a general theory of systems, a general theory of evolution, and a general theory of communication, all three theoretical components are necessary for the specifically sociological theory of society. They are also mutually interdependent. On this level, as a result (and this is always the case when essential interdependence is involved), it makes no sense to ask if one of the three theories is "more fundamental" than the others. There is nothing to be gained by resorting either to hierarchies or to the celebrated game of dichotomies: Stability or change? Structure or process? Consensus or conflict? One presupposes the other: a theory of conflict must also provide a theory of consensus, a theory of processes must also explain structures, and so forth.

Right/left puzzles and above/below puzzles presumably are popular among sociologists because they are so unbelievably simple. The tripartite theory of society just sketched, however, requires much more complex analyses: not a simple contrast technique but instead a combinatory procedure. In what follows I want to report on some of my own experiences with such a project and its various difficulties. In order to be brief, this can best be done by citing examples.

(1) My first example concerns the problem of *social differentiation*. According to classical theory, the evolution of society involves an increasing differentiation of the societal system. Differentiation was customarily conceived on the model of the division of labor developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The embarrassments to which this model leads are famous enough to have discredited it. I shall restrict myself here to three problems: (a) Since there are obvious limits to how minutely subdivided any meaningful division of labor can be, this classical model had to postulate a terminus, or a *ne plus ultra* of social evolution; and this end appears to have already been reached in our so-called post-industrial society. (b) It was thought that a counterbalance or compensation for differentiation could easily be provided by "integration" and by an increase in the generality of shared beliefs (just as "coordination" compensated for the division of labor). This optimistic assumption, however, underrated the plethora or troublesome side-effects accompanying extreme differentiation. And (c) the classical model was not able to handle adequately either the problems or the facts of social stratification. This last defect resulted in its being labeled a political ideology of the ruling class.

These difficulties have long been common knowledge. The first remedy attempted was a generalization of the concept of the division of labor: social theorists spoke in highly abstract terms about "structural differentiation." This broadened concept, however, covered too much and explained too little. Above all, it could not be successfully combined with other analyses in the theory of evolution, since evolution, obviously enough, not only differentiates structures but also generalizes and simplifies them.

When we reconstruct this interconnection between evolution and societal differentiation from the standpoint of systems theory, it immediately becomes much more complex. System differentiation, in fact, concerns not only systems themselves but also their environments as well as the relations between systems and environments. Increasing differentiation, as a result, produces both different kinds of units, and (for each unit) a different environmental cluster in an overarching or shared society. Finally, correspondingly diverse techniques emerge for dealing with this difference between systems and environments. To reduce this to a formula that throws light on the self-referential structure of the argument: the various differences between systems and environments are themselves differentiated from one another.

A theory of this "relational" kind is highly complicated and difficult to picture compared with classical shoemaker-and-tailor theories of the division of labor. But it has a much greater capacity for generating new theoretical insights. On this basis, for example, we can immediately distinguish between three types of differentiation within society: (a) *segmentary differentiation* on the basis of an equality between systems and environments; (b) *stratification* on the basis of equality within each system (class or stratum) and inequality between systems and their environments; and (c) *functional differentiation* on the basis of a functional equality within systems and a functional inequality between systems and their environments.

These three principles of differentiation can be combined in many different (but not haphazard) ways. The complexity of society depends on which principle of differentiation is primary. This option governs the types of system/environment relation that develop within society. In general, we say that *archaic* societies are primarily differentiated in a segmentary way, that *high cultures* are primarily differentiated according to social strata or class, and that *modern society* (by contrast) is primarily differentiated along functional lines. This last principle permits the greatest system complexity, because on a secondary level of differentiation it also incorporates stratification and segmentation. What has characterized all previous social evolution, in other words, is not simply an increasing differentiation, but a shift in the primary principle of differentiation. Older forms of differentiation, in other words, become secondary when a richer and more demanding principle of differentiation makes its appearance.

It may be of especial interest to explore the consequences of this theoretical approach for an understanding of social stratification. I want to stress (in a way that will irritate many sociologists) that stratification too presents us with a case of *system formation on the basis of equality*. Stratification permits and facilitates communication among equals during a phase of social development dominated by inequality. As a result, more communication occurs than could be expected if there were no stratification. Stratification is "equality wedged into inequality," i.e., stratum-specific or class-bound equality. In this way, inequality, even though it is the dominant principle of differentiation, becomes a marginal phenomenon and can be convincingly treated as the mere environment of one's own stratum or class. Both empirical research and the critique of stratification, because of their moralistic preoccupations with domination, exploitation, and a general asymmetry in the distribution of life chances have lost sight of this genuinely positive contribution of stratiform differentiation. As a result, they are unable to give an adequate account of the very complex relations between stratification and functional differentiation. A sociology that restricts itself to unmasking inequalities unmasks only its own biases and requires in turn a sociological critique.

(2) My next example also concerns the differentiation of society. It has the dual virtue of helping us achieve greater analytical precision and bringing us back to the problem of self-reference.

We spoke earlier about the difference between systems and environments. That was a rather coarse oversimplification which must now be refined. In all differentiated systems every subsystem has only three system references: *its relation to the encompassing total system, its relation to other subsystems*, and *its relation to itself*. This three-part schema remains latent in segmentary societies, since the principle of equality defines all three relations. Only with the marked rise of inequality (e.g., in literate societies with written histories) does this triad of relations become a problem. Here it serves, in the form of a *pars pro toto* logic of hierarchical representation, to orient the upper class.[3] But only in a functionally differentiated society does this tripartite system-reference attain a form that compels a scrupulous articulation of the *differences* between the three relations (as well as of the high degree of system autonomy).

Given functional differentiation, every subsystem (be it politics, science, economy, family, education or law) must articulate its three system-references in the following way: its relation to society as institutionalized *function*; its relation to neighboring subsystems as *performance*, received as input and produced as output; and its relation to itself as *reflection* or *self-reflection*. Here is an example: the scientific system fulfills its societal function through the production of *intersubjectively sharable truths*; its performance for other subsystems consists in *application-oriented research*; and, it reflects on itself in *fundamental theorizing* and in its decisions to continue or discontinue its historically given traditions. None of these three system references can be reduced to the others. This means that neither its function in society, nor its input-output performances, nor self-reflection on its own identity can alone regulate the selective processes of a subsystem. As a result, a high degree of subsystem autonomy becomes obligatory, since such utterly heterogeneous demands can only be satisfied in discrete social domains.

This is a sketch, if I may be permitted to say so, of a post-dialectical research program. It does not require us to pursue long concatenations of negation after negation. Instead, it asks us to recognize combinatory possibilities with reference to specific functions, specific performances, and diverse traditions of self-identification. We may presume here that the different functional domains have unequal chances for development. For example, it is by no means assured in a complex, highly differentiated society (in which science and economic life obviously flourish) that satisfactory combinations of function, performance, and self-reflection can be found for religion or for art. To this extent, the evolution of society has emphatically "selective" consequences for what remains possible in its later stages.

(3) Our next topic, sociocultural evolution, has already been broached. Following the theoretical model sketched at the outset, evolution cannot be adequately depicted as the unity of a "process." It cannot, that is, be characterized as *physis*. On the other hand, all evolution *can* be defined by reference to successful differentiation between mechanisms for variation, for selection, and for stabilization. These diverse functions must be assigned to diverse "vehicles" and their collaboration must be regulated. To explain how this is possible, we must resort to concepts and theories not available in the general theory of evolution.

In the case of sociocultural evolution, it appears obvious that we should look for supplementary theories and concepts in systems theory and communication theory. For instance, it seems plausible to say that a *capacity for evolutionary variation* is guaranteed because language always offers the option of saying "no." We can disagree or say something unexpected without becoming unintelligible. We can communicate new, surprising, and unsettling messages, and still be understood.

For this very reason, of course, not everything we say has "communicative success." Not every message we send is accepted by others as a premise for their future behavior. Thus, as the linguistic freedom to introduce deviations and variations increases, so grows the need to develop guarantees for the acceptability of conveyed choices or selections. This is achieved through symbolically generalized media of communication, through particular codes (such as truth, political power and law, property and money, love and art) which provide institutionalized rules for determining *when* attempts at communication will probably be successful.

Communicative success, however, is a mechanism of *evolutionary selection.* On the basis of what I began by calling the central problem of communication theory—the problem of the irrepressible contingency of the acceptance/rejection of communicated messages—there developed a differentiation between evolutionary mechanisms for variation and for selection, i.e., between language and the media of communication. This happened after the discovery of writing (affiliated with the emergence of high cultures). High cultures are always based on a self-reflective awareness of communicative contingency. When we read carefully the biblical history of Creation, we find an especially clear example of this: in a world that has been created, the possibility of negation cannot be left uncreated (Burke 1961). It is implicit as a possibility, and the possible will become real in the course of time.

But does *everything* possible become real? This is precisely what the theory of evolution denies. Selection is only selection when it can simultaneously "de-realize" some of what is possible. Moreover, it happens that, in complex and highly differentiated societies, communicative selection no longer guarantees the stability and reproducibility of problem solutions. *Stabilization,* instead, requires a special mechanism: *system formation.*

It was certainly no accident that, along with the development of an increasingly complex social order in modern Europe, problems of stability, maintenance, and reproduction emerged. It is characteristic, incidentally, that they were first conceptualized in the theological context of the theory of Creation, with special reference to the problem of *creatio continua* (Blumenberg 1970). It was likewise no accident that at the same time new, risky, and one might say "unsocial" selective procedures were liberated: *curiosity* became a legitimate motive for pursuing knowledge, *profit* became something like income without a contractual base (i.e., without social legitimation), *raison d'état* became a political maxim, and empassioned *love* became a sufficient basis for choosing a partner.

Possibilities for further analysis in the history of ideas or in the sociology of knowledge can only be alluded to here. Such analysis might perhaps show that the dominant ideas of modern society (and by no means just the concept of evolution) mirror a sharp differentiation between mechanisms for variation, for selection, and for stabilization. It was thus no accident that the concept of a system (which had earlier been a label either for the organization of a book, for fundamental hypotheses, or for an analytical instrument of knowledge) came to designate the structure of the object itself.

IV

These remarks bring me to the concluding portion of my exposition, and also back to its beginning. It seems that fundamental evolutionary transformations of society are always chaperoned by a "consciousness" that registers and evaluates them. The emergence of the Greek *polis* was such a case. It was repeated on the territorial level during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The transition to modern bourgeois society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is another case, an epochal turn that brought all societal structures to a higher level of "selectivity." That is to say, these structures began to appear both as objects and as principles of choice. As a result, almost no concept kept its old meaning or content intact.[4] But why did this bourgeois society develop, as its escorting consciousness, a reflexive and self-referential theory that concurrently reflected on its own status as a theory? Are there sociologically convincing reasons for this? And must we, as sociologists, grind to a halt before the mere *fact* of a correlation between social structures and theoretical forms? Should not a self-referential theory both be required to do and be capable of doing more? Can it not, through the flexibility of its theoretical options, explain why a theory such as itself first became possible and adequate, why it offered contingent truths, and why therefore it had to develop a self-referential foundation?

My conjecture is that the answer to these questions must refer to the style of rationality characteristic of modern society. The sort of rationality I have in mind no longer allows itself to be fastened rigidly to any fixed point nor to be directed toward preset goals. To reduce it to a formula: rationality must now be able to combine a high degree of *randomness* with a high degree of *specification* (cf. Claessens 1965). This requires a thematization of the structural relevance of time in all principal sectors of society. It also requires levels of communication where we can communicate reflexively about our own communication (cf. Krippendorf 1969, esp. p. 110). Cognitive methods (or procedures) adequate to these requirements will be reflexive in a three-tiered sense. Adequate experience with self-referential theories will be recognized as necessary, and must in turn be made into the object of theoretical and methodological consideration.

There has recently been much talk about "reflexive sociology." Especially in German, frivolous combinations of words with a prefixed "self" (e.g., self-presentation, self-thematization, self-reference, self-selection, self-stigmatization) seem to proliferate endlessly. Nevertheless, I do not believe that the problem has even been adequately posed, let alone solved. On the one hand, science-enamored sociologists have stiffened into an uncomprehending rejection, because they no longer see the grounds—offered precisely by the theory of science—for accepting self-referential structures. On the other hand, the Marxist epidemic continues to spread—i.e., the false inference from self-referential negation to a negative evaluation in the analysis of capital. This provokes overhasty "trend reversals" and a critique aimed at the left intellectual "reflection elite." These latter are judged on the basis of their behavior and its consequences—a procedure that interrupts the connection with the tradition of self-referential problems. In this case, we can say that conservatives have not proceeded conservatively enough. Given this situation, it is no surprise that no intelligent politics can develop that is able to provide a politically useful conceptualization of the central question: should we continue the structural achievements of bourgeois society?

By contrast to this, we can easily show that various prominent theories within contemporary sociology are nevertheless built in self-implicating ways. If we pursue this suggestion, we encounter three diverse approaches: systems theory, evolutionary theory, and communication theory. We cannot reduce these three approaches to one. At any rate, I have not succeeded in doing so, even after considerable effort. On the other hand, these approaches are not set side by side, disconnected from one another like islands of theory in a pluralistic ocean of social science. They presuppose each other. No matter which aspect one begins with, the construction of a theory of society eventually requires that the others be introduced.

This theory does not smuggle in any premises in an a priori fashion.[5] Instead, it begins only with experiences of past theory-construction, different strategies for arranging its material, and so forth. Therefore, there can be no absolute guarantee that precisely this concept or that combination of self-referential theories offers the best imaginable standpoint for understanding our society. In point of fact, we can dispense with such foundationalist certainty. We have learned (and it passes for legitimate) to introduce all initial premises as hypotheses. Of course, entertaining hypotheses is often practiced only as a kind of safety device, freeing the researcher from concern with justification. Essentially, however, hypothetical thinking means that science, as an undertaking specialized in cognitive learning, can accept no restrictions on its capacity to learn. Indeed, this is the highest commandment of all science: accept no restrictions on the capacity to learn! Not even if these restrictions take the form of truths! The theoretical form of self-referential theory conforms precisely to this injunction.

At first, of course, self-referential theories are logically and empirically devoid of content. Learning, however, requires a limiting of what is possible. But can we learn on the basis of restrictions and simultaneously postulate an unrestricted learning capacity? Can we eat our cake and have it too? Can science proceed like the economy? Can it, while renouncing liquidity for the sake of investment, still increase wealth, when wealth consists only in the exchangeability of commodities? Is it possible to overcome scarcity? Are there unlimited possibilities which can nonetheless be made practicable?

The considerations that I have presented to you do not seek an answer in a purely "reflexive" processing of negations, and certainly not in mystical totalizations. Instead, they follow the suggestion of working with a *plurality* of *self-referential* research approaches, and trying to link these together in a coherent theory. In a much more inclusive fashion than previously possible in the philosophical tradition, highly general problems about formal relations can now be connected to pre-existent and conceptually codified research experiences. The conceptual and technical apparatus necessary for this task is quite extensive and the course of argumentation neither linear nor circular but rather labyrinthine. This corresponds to the intention of producing contingent (non-necessary) truths.[6] In the theory itself there arises, through this combinatory procedure, a surfeit of possibilities for abstraction. There is no presuppositionless beginning and no recognizable end. Such a theory will limit itself or eliminate its excess of analytical possibilities by sticking close to the internal interdependencies of its object domain. Concurrently, however, there emerge oblique perspectives and new possibilities for abstraction that transform what has already been "thought through" back into an inchoate condition. All this is very difficult to present with classical means, for instance, in the form of a book. But in one central point I am, despite all these difficulties, relatively optimistic: there *are* theoretical contexts where it can be made possible to learn without renouncing the capacity to learn.

12

The Future Cannot Begin

Temporal Structures in Modern Society

I. The History of the Future

The history of the future does not reach back very far. Human life, of course, always includes both an immediate future and an immediate past. This immediate time, this time attached to conditioned and conditioning events, was initially distinguished from a more distant past and a more distant future. These, in turn, tended to fuse together in the darkness of mythic time. Later, philosophy reconceptualized this view by a two-tiered theory of time, distinguishing eternal time from the time of changing events.[1] Given this conception of time, medieval philosophers felt no need to recognize any difference between existence and perpetuation, seeing creation and preservation as one identical act of God. They suggested that the mere succession of thoughts and events produced the idea of time but could not change, as such, the relation between God and His creatures.

It was not until the structural change from traditional to bourgeois society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that this older

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notion was dissolved and replaced by a temporal structure that contained in itself the possibility of greater complexity. Arthur Lovejoy (1936) claims for the eighteenth century a "temporalizing of the chain of being." This implies a restructuring of the *series rerum* in the sense of a development from simple to complex forms. The retrogressive time reckoning "before Christ" did not gain widespread acceptance until the eighteenth century (Klempt 1960, pp. 81ff). Thanks to this innovation the past was delivered from the need to be grounded in an initial event. Thus, it became susceptible to limitless historical research. But if there is no longer a fixed moment in which the past began (which sets time itself into motion, creates the best of all possible worlds, and defines the natural forms), what will happen to the future? If time has any unity, a fundamental change in our conception of the past cannot remain without consequences for our perception of the future.

This temporalization of being not only discredited the theory of natural forms, but also undermined the Aristotelian conception of negation as deprivation (*steresis, privatio*).[2] The problem of negativity had to be reformulated as a universal category. At least since the eighteenth century, every experience and every action has presupposed negation as a condition for selective determination or choice. The future became what it still is today: an overstocked storehouse of possibilities from which we can choose only by means of negation.

It must now be recognized that the future (and this means past futures as well as our present future) may be quite different from the past. Time can no longer be depicted as approaching a turning point where it veers back into the past or where the order of this world (or time itself) is apocalyptically transformed. As a functional equivalent for the end of time, however, the future may well contain emergent properties and yet unrealized possibilities. It has become an open future.

Controversies remain about the exact date at which this modern conception of the future was born (Nisbet 1969, pp. 106ff). Some authors pinpoint the seventeenth century, others the second half of the eighteenth (Koselleck 1967; 1968). The latter view seems geared to the fact that the second half of the eighteenth century changed human expectations about coming events from a pessi-

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mistic to an optimistic outlook. The sense of moral decay was replaced by a belief in progress (Becker 1932). The latest possible date is the French Revolution, which changed the meaning of "revolution" from a turning back to a moving forward and put the word *l'avenir* into common use. In the proceedings of the Institut National, I found the phrase: *Le temps présent est gros d'avenir,*[3] apparently current at that time (1798).

The wording *temps présent* is interesting in itself. In what sense can time be present? One possible interpretation might be that the phrase "present time," by adding stress to the notion of the present, compensates for an experienced loss of meaning and duration in the present moment itself.[4] In point of fact, if we have an almost infinite historical past, structured and limited only by our actual interests, as well as an open future, the present tends to become a turning point which switches the process of time from the past into the future. The French Revolution symbolized and demonstrated the possibility of this understanding by its practice. The Germans chimed in by writing *Zeitgedichte*, "time poems," poems of contemporary political relevance (Wilke 1974).

The "punctualization" of the present, however, *preceded* the open future by more than a hundred years. In the early seventeenth century the unity of existence and preservation was already split apart. The present was conceived as intermittent or episodic and as depending on secondary causes for its continuing endurance. Hereafter, the current moment had to be conceived as instantaneous change. The modern transformation of time perspectives, in other words, began with a reconceptualizing of the present. It then led to a series of rescue operations: to the concept of a system, to an increasing interest in mechanisms and security, and (during the eighteenth century) to the interpretation of existence as sentiment. But only the economic and political breakthrough of bourgeois society provided an apt background for solving time problems by temporal means. It allowed men to extend the horizons of past and future and to gear the present toward their difference. To put it in the romantic words of Lamennais: "I fly from the present by two routes, that of the past and that of the future" (Poulet 1956, p. 26).

This may be sufficient evidence (and it would not be difficult to produce more) that, with the rise of bourgeois society, the structure

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of time changed drastically in the direction of greater temporal complexity. At any rate, we can only surmise that this change had a decisive impact on every social structure as well as on every concept. Nothing retained its old significance intact. A formal continuity in institutions and terminologies only superficially concealed the fact that every facet of the social order achieved greater selectivity, that is, began to appear as contingent and changeable, or as merely one available option among many others.[5]

We have been reacting to this change for a long time. We now observe the "loss of the stable state" (Schon 1973) and know that a faster rate of change requires more anticipatory behavior—literally, more acting before the event or more future-oriented planning (Emery and Trist 1973, p. 88). However, we still do not have a satisfactory concept of time. The prevailing "solution" to this problem involves a distinction between several different notions of time.[6] Still, we lack a satisfactory theory that would enable us to correlate variations in social structure with variations in temporal structure. This deficiency is not a problem specific to functionalist theory. It has older and deeper roots (Martins 1974).

II. Toward a Concept of Time

It is by now quite common to say that time is an aspect of the social construction of reality. This view suggests that there are several distinct forms of time or a plurality of *Temporalgestalten* (Sorokin and Merton 1937; Sorokin 1964, pp. 171 ff; Gurvitch 1964, esp pp. 20 ff, on multiple times). This conception detaches time from chronology. Accordingly, we may have several varieties of time within one overarching chronology. But there remain questions to be asked: Can we reduce the unity of time to the unity of chronology? Do we not lapse back, by assuming a plurality of times, to the pre-Aristotelian notion of time as a movement or process? Have we made no progress beyond the classical definition of time as a measure of movement?

In order to avoid an uncontrolled conflation of the ideas of time and movement, I propose to define time as *the social interpretation of reality with respect to the difference between past and future.*

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This definition presupposes, of course, that daily life confronts everyone with the experience of change and that it contains in itself the starting point for its own "timing." I could demonstrate this presupposition by phenomenological analysis. The elemental experience of change, however, is not quite yet time, as Husserl himself admitted in his later years. It is, of course, pervasive and unavoidable. If you do not see or hear any change, you will feel it streaming through yourself. It is the dowry that organic life brings for its marriage with culture. And it predetermines the universality of time at the cultural level. But it remains, by and large, open for cultural elaboration and variation, precisely because it is a *universal* predisposition for the temporalizing of experience.

This conceptual approach offers us several important advantages:

(1) It begins by making a clear distinction between movement, process, or the everyday experience of change on the one hand, and the cultural constitution of time as a generalized dimension of meaningful reality on the other.

(2) Chronology, as a consequence, can be conceived as a standardized scheme covering both movement and time. It fulfills several functions at once. First, it compares and interrelates movements that are not simultaneously present.[7] Second, it establishes relations between past and future in the double sense of fixed distances and of a movement of chronological units (dates, not events!) from the future to the past. And third, it links the concrete experience of change in daily life to the abstract relational structure of time. These multiple functions are interconnected by the employment of a common standard for establishing distance between dates. Not time, as Aristotle would have it, but chronology creates distance. It serves as an evolutionary universal which combines very simple rules for its application with highly complex functions. In this respect, curiously enough, it is quite similar to money.

(3) We should carefully avoid, in sum, any confusion between chronology and time. The approach I would like to propose construes the temporal dimension as the relation between the past and the future. Thereby, contemporary conceptions of the past and the future are always decisive factors for the constitution of time. Complexity in time, for example, correlates with the high probability of divergence between past and future states. As a result, increasing

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complexity in time will have decisive impact upon the prevailing interpretations of the past and the future. The history of the future, mentioned at the beginning of this essay, illustrates this point.

(4) The relation between the past and the future will not take the same shape in every society. We can suppose that there are correlations between this relation and other social variables. We may formulate the hypothesis that increasing system differentiation correlates with an increasing dissociation between the past and the future. Great discontinuity, on the other hand, may *shorten* time perspectives in the sense that the remote past and future both become irrelevant. There is some empirical evidence to support this proposition (Bernot and Blancard 1953, pp. 321-32; Galtung 1970; Zube 1972), much to the surprise of social theorists for whom the growing importance of time in modern society signaled an expansion of time in the chronological sense.

(5) This brings me back to my central thesis and suggests the following formulation: the *relevance* of time (in fact, I would maintain, "relevance" as such) depends upon a capacity to interrelate the past and the future in a present.[8] All temporal structures relate to some sort of present. As we have seen, however, the endurance of the present had to be shaken before a temporality could be constructed that was compatible with the complexity of modern society.

III. The Future as Temporal Horizon

Time itself as well as its conceptualization are changed through the mechanisms of sociocultural evolution. This has consequences for the way we see and conceive our future. Sociological analysis, therefore, faces a two-sided problem: its concept of the future should be reasonably adequate *both* for scientific procedures *and* with regard to its own historical situation. Each type of adequacy specifies a divergent requirement, particularly for our own advanced and highly complex society.

In order to articulate the complexities of this problem, it will be useful to distinguish between three different ways of conceptualizing the future: the chronological conception, the theory of modalities, and phenomenological analysis.

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The *chronological conception* presupposes the identity and continuity of time and recognizes only one principle of differentiation: chronologically fixed dates. The future is the series of dates that will follow the present. This conception suggests that the future will begin when the present ends. A thorough analysis, however, shows that we cannot think of two immediately contiguous instants of time without also thinking of an interval separating them.[9] Medieval authors concluded that a beginning and an end cannot exist, except as properties of the instantaneous present.[10] Furthermore, we know from cultural comparisons as well as from empirical investigations that, in daily life, we experience time as more or less discontinuous. The future is disconnected from the present, and only a few societies (and in those societies only a fraction of their members) feel obliged to gloss over these discontinuities and to level them out by a kind of mathematical calculation (Sorokin and Merton 1937; Cottle and Klineberg 1974, pp. 108 ff).

The *theory of modalities* has been used since the Middle Ages to formulate a two-tiered conception of reality, specifying different modes in which being and nonbeing can present themselves. The temporal *modes* are the past, the present, and the future. They are distinct modes, of course, but here again a kind of idealizing and equalizing is at work. It is presupposed that these three modes of time, at least as modes, are on an equal footing. This may be due simply to linguistic requirements. We have to choose between three tenses. Whereas chronology depends upon mathematical calculation, the theory of modalities depends on language. Its prototype seems to be simple *speaking about something*. However, in our historical situation—at the "present time"!—it may be necessary to question not only "Galilean" idealizations (Husserl 1954) but also linguistic schemes which we use every day and on which we continue to depend. The theory of temporal modalities leaves open and undecidable the question whether the beginning should be conceived as a *remotio* (withdrawal) of the past and a *positio* (instauration) of the present or as a withdrawal of the present and an instauration of the future.[11] And the main question would be whether the treatment of the present as one of the modes of time is at all adequate.[12]

The theory of modalities seems to offer a rational model for the

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fact that "meaning" is always something which preserves its self-identity by referring explicitly to horizons of further exploration and modification.[13] If this is true, we shall have to use *phenomenological analysis* to help us find our way back to the origins of time. This means that we must conceive both the future and the past as "temporal horizons" of the present. The present thus receives a special status by virtue of its function. It interrelates time and reality and represents a set of constraints on the temporal integration of the future and the past.

Now, this conceptual reshuffling makes it necessary to explain more clearly what it means to conceive of the future as a temporal horizon of the present. The most important consequence is noted in the title of this article: the future cannot begin. Indeed, the essential characteristic of an horizon is that although we can never touch it and never surpass it, nevertheless it contributes to the definition of our situation. Our movements and thoughts can shift the accompanying horizon, but they can never reach it.

If we characterize processes and activities as beginning or ending, we employ a terminology that belongs to the present. If we use these expressions when referring to remote dates (for example: the Roman Empire "began" to fall), we mean a present that occurred in the past or a present that will occur in the future. The iterative use of temporal modalities (past presents, future presents, etc.) goes back at least to Augustine. It is essential for a theory of time that distinguishes time from chronology. But this is not enough. For modern society, it is especially important that we be able to distinguish between our future presents and our present future. We can even speak, if necessary, about the future of future presents, the future of past presents (*modo futuri exacti*), and so on.[14] This iterative use of modal forms has always been a problem for the theory of modalities (Meinong 1915). For example: why not speak of "the future of futures" like "the heaven of heavens" (*coelum coeli*)? Only phenomenological analysis can justify the selection of meaningful combinations of modal forms. What it shows, in fact, is that all iteration of temporal forms must have its basis in a present.[15]

If we accept this distinction between our present future and our future presents, we can define an open future as a present future that leaves room for several mutually incompatible future presents.

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"Open future," of course, is only a dim metaphor. In a sense, the openness or contingency of the future has been a topic of logical and theological discussions since Aristotle's famous ninth chapter of *On Interpretation.*[16] But it was primarily discussed with respect to the limits of logic and human cognition in their application to future events. This binary code of logic was not understood as a technique for defuturizing the future.

The ancients started with generalizations of their everyday world by means of cosmological and theological assumptions and did not think about *the* future but rather about oncoming events and the possibility of their privative negation (Engelhardt, 1966, pp. 352-74). By contrast, we experience our future as an horizon of surplus possibilities that must be drastically reduced as we approach them. We can easily imagine different degrees of openness; and we give the names *futurization* to an increase and *defuturization* to a decrease in the openness of a present future. Defuturization may lead to the limiting case where the present future merges with future presents and only one future remains possible. In fact, the structure of modern society prevents defuturization from going this far. But there are techniques for defuturization that were originally conceived as countermeasures to an excessively open future. Léon Brunschvicg has drawn our attention to the fact that the statistical calculus defuturizes the future without identifying it with a single chain of events (Brunschvicg 1949, p. 355). And indeed, the new interest in probability, games of chance, and statistics that arose in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries corresponds closely to an emerging interest in the future and to the idea that it may turn out to be a rational and even a secure strategy to prefer the insecure over the secure (Coumet 1970). Thus, there are ways to make use of the future without beginning it and without reducing it to one chain of datable future presents.

IV. Temporal Integration Redefined: Technology and Utopia

We have now reached a point where we can redefine the problem of temporal integration. One possible approach would be to say

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that temporal integration is achieved when wishful thinking and quixotic perspectives are changed into something more realistic, when they are adapted to the outcome of the past insofar as it has structured the present (Cottle and Klineberg 1974, pp. 70 ff). This view interprets realism as maturity. But why so? If lower-class children abandon certain educational and occupational aspirations, this may be all the better for them. It would only be rational, however, if reality itself were rational. Identifying temporal integration with a realistic orientation presupposes a perfect world—*realitas sive perfectio*. This is a well known traditional premise, but it does not distinguish sufficiently between time and reality. As a result, it prevents our using temporal integration as a means to control—not necessarily to change—reality.

There have been societies that had to employ reality to control rationality. Ours, however, has to use rationality to control reality. Its structure and environment are too complex for adaptive procedures, and in any case there is not enough time available for adjustment.[17] Under conditions of overwhelming complexity, time becomes scarce. Time must replace reality as the paramount dimension of social life while the future obtrudes itself as the predominant horizon. Such a society will above all need forms and procedures of temporal integration that combine our present future with our future presents. It will consider the past only as a set of facts that can no longer be prevented from existing or occurring.

The prevailing conception of our present future seems to be a utopian one with either optimistic or pessimistic overtones.[18] The future serves as a screen upon which to project hopes and fears. A utopian picture of the future serves as a basis for rational behavior geared toward different (predictable and unpredictable) future presents, at least in the form of coherent negations. The future is expected to bring about the communist society, an ecological disaster, emancipation from domination or *l'homme intégrale* extolled by Sartre and Merleau-Ponty.[19] This, no doubt about it, is the future that cannot begin. It remains a present future and (at the very least) an infallible sign that social critics are on the scene. Utopian images of the future withdraw if we try to approach them. They will not vanish, however, so long as the structural conditions of our present society endure. Of course, utopian thinking may appropriate new

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symbols if old ones are worn out by disappointments and new experiences. Recent experience seems to show that utopian futures can accelerate their rate of change and may even vary so quickly that they will never have a chance to be tested or get confirmed in a present situation.

Technology, on the other hand, refers to future presents. Indeed, it transforms them into a string of anticipated presents. It postulates and anticipates causal or stochastic links between future events in order to incorporate them into the present present. This implies two important reductions of complexity. In the first, events (emerging recombinations of independent contingencies) are transformed or reinterpreted as "carriers" of the process of determining what shall occur or be brought about in the future. In the second, a sequential pattern or a chain of interconnected events is brought into relief. Complexity is "sequentialized" by abstracting more or less from interfering processes.[20] A future defuturized by technology may be used as a feigned present from which we can choose our present present in order to make it a possible past for future presents. To justify the choice and, more importantly, to justify this whole procedure of technical defuturization, we use values. Values, then, have the function of guaranteeing the quality of present choice in spite of technical defuturization. Any refinement of technological forecasting and control, however, will make future presents all the more surprising, because it will multiply defeasible assumptions about the present future. In the present, as a consequence, technology requires numerous mechanisms for coping with surprise: learning potential, planned redundancies, and a generalized ability to substitute functional equivalents.

Technology and utopias, of course, represent very different approaches to the future. Their difference suggests options and encourages polemical behavior. Many of our ideological discussions and political confrontations draw their ammunition from this bifurcation. If you embark on a vessel called *Utopia*, you will become highly critical of technology, and rightly so, even if you are prepared to use technology to launch your vessel from the shores. If, on the other hand, you set out to improve technology you may get annoyed, and again rightly so, with people who use the future as a substitute for reality and interfere with your work without contributing to it.

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Each side tries to promote its own view of the future and to suppress its rival.[21] But a total view consists in the difference itself: that between our (open) present future and our (eventual) future presents. This difference itself is a historical fact, produced and reproduced by the structure of our society. We cannot avoid it or circumvent it so long as we continue to live in this highly complex society. But that does not mean we have to pursue these pointless polemics.

To be sure, critical discussion and polemics have the important advantage of being *present* behavior. Any attempt to replace them by simply posing the problem of temporal integration would defer the solution of this problem to the future and would, as a result, slide off into either utopian or technical channels. In other words, the problem of temporal integration would become either a utopian or a technical problem and would thus perpetuate itself.

An open and indeterminate future seems to suggest a shift from thought to action (as Marx would have it), or, today, a shift from prognosticating to creating the future (Huber 1974, pp. 29-39). This sounds like: if you cannot see, you have to act! But both prediction and action have utopian and technical aspects. Substituting the one for the other does not solve the problem of temporal integration. Our complex society has to use both methods for reducing the complexity of its future. It has to sequentialize both predictions and actions into complex self-referential patterns. There is no question of choice between prediction and action, although social and structural limitations on the combination of predictions with actions may become a problem.

V. Social Communication as a Nontemporal Extension of Time

It should now be clear that temporal integration, and for that matter the integration of utopian schemes and technology, can be accomplished only as a present performance. Therefore, older societies which thought of themselves as living in an enduring (or even eternal) present did not experience our problem. Only in modern times, and only after a shortening of the time span of the

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present, does the problem of perseverance or *conservatio* become of current interest (Blumenberg 1970). And only at that point did utopian schemes and technology diverge. By virtue of the restructuring of time which has occurred during the last 200 years, the present has become specialized in the function of temporal integration. Unfortunately, it does not have enough time to do its job.

We are now in a position to grasp the importance of the theoretical contributions of George Herbert Mead (1932) and Alfred Schutz (1932) concerning the interrelations between temporal and social experience. Both authors are aware of the fact that social communication *defines the present for actors* (because it commits them to the premise of simultaneity) and provides in addition *the chance for a nontemporal extension of time.* "The field of mind," in the words of Mead, "is the temporal extension of the environment of the organism," and the mechanisms which accomplish this are social ones (1932, p. 25). Of course, the environment of systems can *also* be used as a nontemporal extension of time.

Other persons are socially relevant only insofar as they represent, in communication, different pasts and/or different futures. They transform (in a highly selective way) remote temporal relevance into present social relevance. Moreover, the selections of others can be submitted to social control—for example, by the twin mechanisms of trust and distrust (Luhmann 1979a). This nontemporal extension of time by communication creates temporal horizons for selective behavior—a past that can never be reproduced because it is too complex and a future that cannot begin. And it is again this temporal complexity that makes selection and choice necessary for meaningful behavior and communication.

These considerations bring us back to the roots of the evolutionary interdependencies between social and temporal structures. Since this can be regarded as achieved knowledge, we cannot afford to fall back on much simpler notions of the future (as does most social forecasting). The conception of interdependency, however, is in itself too vague to serve as a framework for further analysis. Neither Mead nor Schutz had adequate successors. The next step, indeed, is a difficult one. It requires the conceptualization of both limitations and gains that might result from novel combinations.

In view of the facts produced by our society in its bourgeois

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phase, we should be able to calculate the limits of the meaningful extension of time. We should know something about the social correlates of a wide differentiation between temporal horizons. We should be able to anticipate a change in temporal structures as a consequence of social change—for example, as a consequence of an eventual decline of the monetary mechanism. We should be able to estimate the degree of heterogeneity of temporal structures that we can tolerate in the different subsystems of our society. We should know how the shrinking temporal horizons of families affect the economy. And we should understand how to avoid the well-known negative impact which the time perspectives of a growing economy have on the political system.[22] And, last but not least, we should know what is implied if we rely on clocks and calendars to integrate the distinct time perspectives of different sectors of society and what dysfunctional consequences we have to expect if we use chronology to fulfill this important function.

It is certain that we cannot reduce this set of complex questions involving the future to a single one: how to begin the future? It is, however, difficult to see how we might proceed in elaborating these questions or even answering them. Systems theory seems to be the only conceptual framework which has sufficient complexity. So far, however, systems theory has used only very simple, chronological notions of time and the future, conceiving of the future simply as the state of the system at a later time (Laszlo 1974).

The environment, but not time, is recognized as a set of possible constraints on system states. Abstracting from time, of course, is quite legitimate as a scientific procedure. But then we must refrain from using temporal notions in presenting our results.

In comparison with the theoretical elaboration of problems of time, systems theory is much more advanced in its conceptual complexity. It is the theory of time that lags behind, not the theory of systems. Not only social science but also the theory of history suffers from this deficiency. If the theory of time could be advanced, we might come up with new possibilities for researching correlations between system structures and temporal structures.

The theory of time has to transform its vague idea of "everything is possible in the long run," based on a chronological conception of time, into a concept of temporal structures with limited possi-

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bilities for change. A prerequisite of correlations is that both variables be "reduced contingencies" in the sense that they cannot simply assume any random shape whatever. In other words, we must look for time-inherent restrictions on possible correlations (substituting this for older notions of the substance or essence of time) *before* we set out to discover correlations between system and temporal structures. Nevertheless, these time-inherent restrictions are results of sociocultural evolution and not a priori assumptions about the nature of the world or the conditions for cognition.

If we conceive of time as the relation between (more or less differentiated) temporal horizons, and if we use a conceptual language that allows for iterative modalizations (the present future, future presents, the future of past presents, etc.) and define the function of the present and the function of chronology in these terms, we may have a sufficient starting point for entering into this kind of research. But we should remain aware that a commitment to these conceptualizations is simultaneously a commitment to "modern times." Older societies did not produce such an elaborate framework, and they did not need it in order to understand themselves. They lived (for structural reasons that we may be able to explain) within a less differentiated time.

VI. The Future of Systems

Social systems are nontemporal extensions of time. They make the time horizons of other actors available within one contemporaneous present. This requires two sorts of time: a *sequential* time conceivable as a process elaborated in terms of means and ends, and a *structural* time conceivable as the difference between the system and its environment. With respect to time, the difference between system and environment means that no complex system can rely exclusively on point-to-point relations with its environment—that is, on instantaneous adjustment by immediate experience and immediate reaction (Parsons 1970). It needs time for its own operations. This presupposes that under normal conditions no single event in the environment will change the whole system at once. Changing everything at once is tantamount to destruction. In

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other words, there is no conceivable state of a complex system achievable by changing everything simultaneously. The structural technique by means of which a system avoids this condition of changing everything at the same time is differentiation—or more exactly: a matching of internal and external differentiation (Ashby 1952; Foa, Mitchell, and Fiedler 1971). It is only at this rather taxing theoretical level focusing on the relation between system/environment relations and structure/process relations that we are able to locate our problem. Thus, in regard to their environment, systems depend (for temporal reasons) on a differentiation between structure and process. The time perspective of modern society, on the other hand, postulates a difference between our (open) present future and our (eventual) future presents. Both distinctions, worked out in very different intellectual traditions, seem to converge. If this is true, then we can integrate systems theory and phenomenological research.

In fact, the process of communication in social systems under conditions of contemporaneity provides the prospect of sequential social presents that will endlessly constitute new futures and new pasts. They are (and will remain) presents because they require a simultaneous integration of the perspectives of different actors. Structural conditions, on the other hand, establish for our society an open future in the sense of guaranteeing that future presents can be *chosen.*

Stated in more concrete terms, structural conditions make it possible and even necessary to postpone decisions. And it allows us to use our present future as a kind of storehouse for choices to be made later on. At the same time, the present system operates on the premise of continuing its processes. As a system, it reproduces its present step by step. This sequentializing of presents, however, is meaningful only as a chain of choices, not as a chain of facts. The process of communication is effective to the extent that it produces and reproduces situations of choice.

Going further, we have to break up this general notion of *the postponement of choices*. We must distinguish two essentially different forms: (1) the deferral of gratification and (2) the deferral of negation. Both have their functional and institutional correlates. Deferring gratification is a main prerequisite for the economic sys-

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tem, since it is a condition for capital accumulation and investment. Deferral of negation is a main prerequisite of the political system, since it is a condition for trust in political authority. Both require institutional support and both require a present future for their present motivation. Both need a working integration of utopian schemes and technology as well as a kind of "security basis" for trust.[23] Neither would survive a considerable shrinkage of time horizons. Both may be endangered by too high a turnover rate of utopian schemes and technological innovations. And last but not least: do we not take too much for granted that it is (and will remain) possible, in spite of changing structural conditions, to separate deferral of gratification from deferral of negation and to avoid spillover effects? Or will a refusal to defer gratifications any longer amount to a refusal to defer negations? And finally, will a shrinkage of time horizons in the economy endanger trust in politics, political ideologies, value schemes, and so forth?

All these questions pertain to what we have come to call *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* or modern, market-oriented "civil society." They relate to the continuity or discontinuity of its structures under changing conditions. *Bürgerliche Gesellschaft* has been a revolutionary society placing a strong structural emphasis on time and on the corresponding simplifications of social and environmental relations. The principle of its future was, quite simply, the denial of its past (Ritter 1957) by the counterstructural postulate of equality.[24] The self-conception of this society in its bourgeois variant relied heavily on time-employing and time-binding mechanisms like money and legal procedure. By now, we are aware of highly complex operating conditions and of the narrow limits of effectiveness to which these mechanisms are subject. In its Marxist or dialectical variant, the theory of modern society has had to build its concept of the future on negations of the present. But there is much too much to negate in our present society for dialecticians to use it all for constructing or even launching only one desirable future. They have invariably had to focus narrowly on one problem, thus overemphasizing centralization. And they have been forced to discount complexity in order to design a strictly linear theory that might be used to reconstruct or change "the process of history."

There are many reasons, then, to suspect that modern *bürgerliche*

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Gesellschaft has gone quite far in temporalizing reality and that those twins, bourgeois and Marxist theory, were both based on this common presupposition. This does not answer the question of whether the radical temporalization of reality is a temporary distortion characterizing the period of transition to a new type of world society, or whether it reflects lasting prerequisites of highly complex societies and/or an acceleration of the evolutionary process without parallels in previous history. We are certainly not prepared to answer this question without further research on both the conceptual and the empirical levels. But we already possess the intellectual resources to go beyond the boring controversies between Marxist and bourgeois theory or between utopian and technocratic approaches to the future. Moreover, the building blocks are now available for working out a systems theory of society which recognizes the fact that the future cannot begin and which compensates for what might at first appear to be a loss of the future by the higher complexity of its conception of time.

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13

World-Time and System History

Interrelations Between Temporal Horizons and Social Structures

I

We can go beyond a naïve relation to our own history in various ways. One possibility is to consider the past as a particular object-domain and to ask under what conditions we can come to know it. Within this perspective we can also inquire into the conditions under which our knowledge of the past can become more scientific. We should do so, whenever we want to make such knowledge more like intersubjectively valid science and less like private reminiscence. This "epistemological" perspective takes it for granted that "what is past" is something that once existed. Moreover, it is assumed that a subject worth studying can be selected out of the wealth of what belongs to the objective past on the basis of cognitive interests. We can admit that such cognitive interests sometimes produce ideological distortions and still maintain, with more or less optimism, that these can be eliminated. Social history as a scientific discipline would then be concerned with knowing past social structures and processes. In order to determine what social structures and processes are relevant, social historians could appeal to sociological theories that at present are generally accepted and have proven fruitful. In this way, theories about the connections between social differentiation, the autonomy of subsystems, and symbolic generalization could be put to use in historical research.[1]

I have no intention of disputing either the possibility or the validity of this procedure. Nevertheless, it should be recognized that by proceeding in this way we skirt broad areas that also fall within the competence of sociological theory. These areas have to do with the social conditions underlying the constitution of time and history. The constitution of temporal modalities and the selection of what is relevant in them do not simply lead to epistemological questions. They are already inherent in the subject matter (i.e., in social history) itself. We must accept this, once we recognize that the subject matter of sociology and social history consists of meaningful, self-selective human experience and action. "Meaning" guarantees that individuals can both choose among alternatives and reflect upon their own acts of selecting. To the extent that sociology deals with the problem of meaning (Luhmann 1971d), temporality, too, becomes a constitutive dimension of its subject matter. As a result, time can no longer be treated merely as a category underlying our knowledge of social life.

Perhaps historical research can somehow free itself from the "historical consciousness" inherent in society, as though it were a successor to the traditional *omniscientia Dei* which was supposed to be cotemporal with all periods of history.[2] But this would be arduous. Besides, we could only attempt it after we had analyzed the temporality inherent in society itself. Only then could we know what we have to abstract from and how we should go about it.

It is a sociological commonplace that ideas of time differ from social system to social system and depend upon social structures (Sorokin and Merton 1937; Sorokin and Berger 1939; Fortes 1963; Moore 1963; Jaques 1956; Straus 1962; Gurvitch 1964; Wallis 1970). This thesis has been elaborated with special regard to the speed with which time passes, the scarcity of time, and the extent of the temporal horizon that is relevant to possibilities of action. In other words, theorizing in this area has focused chiefly on economic or "bourgeois" aspects of time. But these are, at best, only a few facets of the general problem of time. Furthermore, in the theory of bourgeois society since Hegel, and particularly in connection with Marx's work, discussion has focused on the historicity or "social rootedness" of consciousness.[3] (This discussion unfortunately has not been clearly separated from the treatment of epistemological questions.) I shall try to combine these individual components with the aid of the more abstract conceptual framework of systems theory. I shall show how social systems constitute time, temporal horizons, and specific interpretations of what is temporally relevant. The term "constitution," of course, does not mean "production" or "creation *ab nihilo.*" Instead, it means making something available and manipulable in a meaningful way in order to increase and reduce complexity at the same time.

I shall limit myself here to a discussion of the temporal horizon of the past. The constitution of an open future would require further analysis along the same theoretical lines.

II

With the aid of systems theory we can begin by drawing a simple (though rather novel) distinction between *experience* and *action.* Selections can be ascribed either to systems or to their environments. Thus, whenever selectivity is attributed to the environment we have "experience." Whenever selectivity is attributed to the system we have "action."[4] The attribution of selectivity (together with the constitution of experience and action) depends on there being an explicit and stable distinction between two levels—e.g., the possible and the actual, the present and the non-present, the known and the unknown, etc. The simultaneous presence of these two levels we shall call the *modalization* of the selection process. Essential to such modalization is that in each case the second level, too, be held present and explicit, since it gives the selection process its character as a selection.

On the basis of these preliminary remarks we can characterize any present experience of time that refers to past or future temporal horizons as a modalization of present experience.[5] For example, propositions about the past are present propositions in the past tense. In other words, we can modalize present experience in such a way that its content takes on the general character of being past. Besides temporal modalizations there are several other forms: epistemological ones having to do with knowledge, or possibilistic ones having to do with a plurality of possibilities, or social ones naving to do with the attribution of selections. Classical discussions of modalities that based modalizations first upon an ontologically interpreted logic, then on language, and then on the conditions for knowledge did not succeed in separating analytically these different sorts of modalization and failed to do equal justice to them all.[6] In addition, we lack a sufficiently abstract and fruitful concept of modality, one that would allow us to understand temporality as just one case of modalization. Here systems theory could be of further help.

Talcott Parsons pointed the way for the first step. His well-known AGIL schema (adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latent pattern maintenance) is constructed along two axes. The first axis expresses the difference between system and environment, while the second is the temporal axis, bifurcated in terms of the difference between present and future gratification. As has recently been made clear (Parsons 1970, p. 30f.; Baum 1976; Piaget 1955, p. 275f.), underlying this schema is the idea that *the differentiation of system and environment produces temporality* because it excludes an immediate and point-for-point correlation between events in the system and events in its environment. Everything cannot happen at once. Preserving the system requires time. The outcome of certain parts of a system's processes is always delayed, and when it finally does occur, it must still find an appropriate relation to the environment. Otherwise, the difference between system and environment will break down.

We can go one step further. From the viewpoint of systems theory all modalizations can be interpreted as generalizations of system-structures. To say that a social structure is "generalized" is to say that it becomes compatible with more than one state of its environment or of the system in which it is located. In other words, this concept, too, presupposes a difference between system and environment.[7] For example, possibilities can be conceived as modal generalizations by means of which what exists can be identified as changeable (i.e., as possibly otherwise) or what is possible can be identified as either existent or nonexistent. Temporal modalizations are generalizations of a different type.[8] They depend on holding constant the identity of the world or of a system through a succession of various states.

All further considerations must build on the assumption that such generalizations vary along with the system structures in which they occur. They neither come about arbitrarily, nor are they a kind of transcendental illusion, a mere extrinsic contribution of the process of knowledge. On the basis of this assumption, I shall investigate how temporal horizons and the structures of social systems are interconnected. In order to do this, we must begin with two fundamental ideas—the concept of meaning and, once again, the difference between system and environment.

III

"Meaning" is fundamental to human experience and action. It is constitutive of time and history to the extent that it enables us to experience the selectivity inherent in all aspects of social life. In other words, every event in which meaning plays an essential role takes place within a horizon of other possibilities. This is the case, even when other possibilities are "excluded" and the event appears inevitable. Negations can *always* be negated in turn.[9] Historical events, as a consequence, are viewed as "relevant" or meaningful not because they are purely factual and not merely because of the sequence in which they happen to occur, but rather because they can be understood as having been selected from an array of other possibilities. World history has "meaning" as the self-selection of being. Thus, it must be understood theoretically as evolution—at least in a society which cultivates an interest in history that is scientific rather than merely political or theological.

The idea of meaning-based history depends on a distinction between what is possible and what is real. This distinction is constituted in the present and projected into the past. Hence, the "historical image" possessed by a society varies not only as a result of our actual selection and presentation of past facts which (for cognitive or other reasons) have been deemed important; that image also often varies with the conditions promoting (or hindering) the selectivity *we* now experience, and especially with the range of possibilities *we* today find ineliminable. Here is one example: It is almost inevitable that we shall describe societies that lack political organizations for issuing binding decisions in case of legal conflict as societies "deprived" of this possibility. And we shall analyze transitions from one institutional arrangement to another as if both possibilities existed at the outset and that first the one and only later the other were realized.[10] Hence, in order to reconstruct the horizons of experience and action that belonged to past societies, we must negate our own current possibilities. This is a theoretical process that we can accomplish only hypothetically. Thus, it is hard to make precise or judge. It presupposes the existence of science as a condition for its own possibility (and to that extent it depends once again upon the present). We shall return to this problem below when we discuss the reflexivity of our understanding of time.

Historical facts embody selections: that is the key to establishing a connection between social structures and temporal horizons. History is a process in which selections are made from a horizon of possibilities. The existence of real or accessible possibilities, in turn, presupposes the formation of systems as the condition for its own possibility. Once again, it seems imperative to transfer a concept originally used in epistemology (i.e., "conditions of possibility") into systems theory. The epistemological thesis that possibilities depend on conditions of possibility and thus differ according to which conditions of possibility are involved can be applied to systems in general by means of the concept of modal generalization.[11] System structures underlie the separation of the possible from the impossible.[12] Furthermore, they must be presupposed in our attempts to differentiate among various kinds of possibility—for example, what is possible politically, economically, or technically. These concepts of "presupposition," "separation," and "differentiation" refer to everyday operations and not merely to cognitive processes. The point is that modal generalization in different directions is possible not simply in cognition but in all acts of consciousness (i.e., in all internal processing of selectivity), and it is employed at the price of creating different forms of possibility.

For the theory of history, it follows that all selectivity (or "coming-to-pass") of facts, rests on system structures. These structures, in turn, serve as enabling or supporting conditions which hold open a specific horizon of possibilities. For example, the concept of nature in Greek antiquity (which lies at the origin of the traditional idea of *societas civilis*) signified the limits of what is politically and legally possible and thereby the limits of the historical selection of *nomos*. These limits, of course, were affected by the political constitution of society that was superimposed upon the primitive tribes. In the writings of the Chinese Legists, a similar concept referred to the fortuitous or contingent satisfaction of needs by the environment. This contingency was supposed to be overcome through the political planning of the economic order. This conception would have been unthinkable to the Greeks, who viewed their economy as lying outside "civil society." Finally, in the bourgeois society of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the concept of nature signaled the limits of what is economically feasible. These different conceptions of nature were conditioned by the different ways in which system differentiation and the relative primacy of the economy and politics are institutionalized. *In each case, they were also related to how each society thought about its own past history.*[13] Primitive societies (where differentiation, the awareness of possibilities, and selection are little developed) lack not only a well-delineated idea of history, but also an exact concept of nature (Nadel 1956, p. 164f.).

Now if it is true that the history of a system (as a history of what selections were made) depends on structural conditions, then remembering is a very taxing process. It does not simply accumulate facts from the past, but also reconstructs the way in which events were selected.[14] This process presupposes that historical facts can be known, and that other unrealized possibilities can be imagined as well. In this regard the distinctions between system and environment and between system history and environmental (or "world") history will appear increasingly important. Recovering the "selectivity" of past events (i.e., understanding them historically as contingently selected) poses such a challenge that we cannot assume that it takes place with equal ease in every psychic and social system that processes meanings. A system's memory *records and retrieves the history* of how *its own* experiences and actions were contingently selected in relation to its environment. In addition, it *reconstructs an environmental (or "world") history* of those selections in which it did not participate and which it needs in order to understand how its own selections fit in with those of other systems.[15] The distinction between the history of a system and the history of its environment need not become explicit for the system itself. But such a distinction does guide the explicit activities of a system, because the conditions for what is possible in the environment and for what is possible in the system always turn out to be different.

The difference between the history of a system and that of its environment is made clear by the presence of distinct conditions that govern the recovery of the past in each case. Any given system records its own history much more carefully than it does for its own prehistory or for the history of other systems in its environment. It is possible, for example, for someone to deny before a court of law that he has committed a murder. It is much more difficult, however, for him to deny before the same court that he previously denied having committed the murder.[16] In other words, it is a standing rule among the participants in a social system that they may presuppose a shared history and memory of the past. Hence, the history of a system serves as a nontechnical guarantee that further experience and actions can be selected that will fit in with what went before. History can be replaced in this function only by complicated technical arrangements (for example, by the legal system). History can serve to structure systems only with this presupposition of a shared past (Luhmann 1975a, p. 26f.). Under certain circumstances, a system can legitimate or at least make possible some degree of "harmless" freedom in an individual's private reconstruction of his past—so long as that past does not belong immediately to the system itself but rather to its environment or to "the world."[17]

History, commonly experienced and remembered, forms an essential presupposition of mutual understanding. It cannot be replaced by an objectively corroborated history of events that took place outside the system and independently of it. When their memories of the system's past diverge, participants cannot share their experiences or rely on common assumptions. Thus, communication across generations becomes difficult. Barriers also arise to obstruct cooperation in organizations with a frequent turnover of personnel. Such organizations have an extremely short memory and their members can only share a common memory of what happened outside the system, in "the world."[18] To be sure, they will be able to draw the same conclusions from the fact that certain events "happened" in the past, but not from the fact that these events were contingently selected. As a result, selections made in the past will not be continued, but either repeated or consigned to oblivion.

IV

My central thesis is easy to formulate in a preliminary way: Complex societies build broader, more abstract, and differentiated temporal horizons than do simpler ones. They are surrounded by a "world" whose complexity has become richer in possibilities, allowing them a greater range of selections in both experience and action. For that reason they can also better synchronize a variety of system-histories within society. This is true even for systems that are of quite different kinds and whose content (e.g., moral content) cannot easily be integrated, and for those that last for different periods of time or develop at different rates of speed.

The remainder of this essay will be guided by the thesis that there exists a correlation between a society's complexity and the complexity of its "world." However, from the viewpoint of systems theory, this thesis is far too simplistic. Certainly, my crude formulation cannot be defended. Social theory, as it progresses, will have to refine this idea in important ways. Our experience in other domains where systems theory has been applied—especially in the theory of organisms, the theory of psychic systems, and the theory of organizations—shows that the complexity of a system is not a variable that can be treated empirically. Historians would meet with the same experience if they tried to directly confront the complexity of a society with the notions of time and history handed down within it. In particular, two necessary modifications must be considered.

First, the complexity of a system is not a one-dimensional but a multi-dimensional property. Hence, only a knowledge of a great many facets of the case can tell us whether one system is more complex than another (McFarland 1969, p. 16; Pawelzig 1970, p. 136). Secondly, a higher complexity does not by itself entail an increased complexity in *every* dimension of the world or in *every* relation to the environment. More complex societies, therefore, do not necessarily have a correspondingly more complex history *in every respect*. On the contrary, research into the cognitive and motivational complexity of psychic systems has shown that more complex systems (those which are more abstractly structured) can come to have complex *as well as* simple relations to their environment. Their environment does not become increasingly complex in every respect. That would demand too much from even the most complex system. Instead, abstract structures allow both complex and simple, both differentiated and undifferentiated, relations to the environment to coexist. They allow a system to concentrate its analytical precision and sensitivity on differences in single sectors of the environment, and to shift this delimited focus when the need arises (Harvey et al. 1961; Walker 1964; Scott 1962; 1963; Vannoy 1965; Suedfeld and Streufert 1966; Schroder et al. 1967; Foa et al. 1971). Language misleads us. More complex systems, just because they are more complex, need not experience *everything* as more complex.

The validity of these general observations is not limited to those sorts of systems for which they were first formulated when earlier simplistic approaches failed. They can also serve as a warning to social theory. Thus, we can begin by assuming that it would be simplistic to think that the complexity of temporal horizons increases in exact proportion to the complexity of society. On the other hand the present state of sociological theory cannot support research that would match the complexity of this subject matter. And it would be absurd to recall these limitations in every sentence. So we shall lay these observations aside. It will not be until sections VII and VIII that we shall examine why increasingly complex societies do not have a more complex history (e.g., one including more facts). Instead, by virtue of their complexity, such societies can even neutralize history, illuminate it selectively (VII) and discard it (VIII). If in complex societies history becomes relevant, it does so by becoming contingent. Memory and forgetfulness, a detailed interest in history and the indifference that buries it as a settled past become equally possible. This stark choice either to study or annul the past is the phenomenon to be correlated with the complexity of modern societies.

V

Normally neither historians nor sociologists ask about the nature of time. If this question is posed directly and framed as one about essences, it cannot be adequately answered. On the other hand, there is a substantial danger that, if we leave this question unaddressed, we shall think about social history in crude and inadequate ways. For example, we might rely simply on the idea that time is a "river" or identify it only with the calendar. Our previous discussions about meaning, selectivity, modal generalizations, system, environment, system-history, and environmental history will allow us to be at least a bit more precise.

Time is constituted as events are selected, for a selection is embodied in an event by its standing out from the background of an enduring structure of possibilities. Even physical systems constitute time to the extent that they are distinguished from their environment and can assume more than one state in relation to it.[19] The fact that such a system can assume more than one state depends in turn upon there being only an incomplete interdependence: not *every* change changes *everything*. Only such interruptions in relations of interdependence (made possible by system-formation), allow future and past to be differentiated. In systems where meaning plays an essential role, the selectivity of events is experienced against a horizon of other possibilities. To the extent that this horizon outlasts those acts of selection, it is understood as time. Hence, no matter how it is to be described in detail, temporal consciousness is a response to the need for conceiving of constancy and change together. Only in this way can systems have "selective" relations to their environments. This very abstract deduction of the concept of time allows room for quite different forms of temporal consciousness, which, as we know, vary with the structures of different societies. We can make this concept more precise only by placing it into a relationship with history and society. We will have to accept that there is no concept of time that is universally valid and precise.

If some sort of temporal horizon arises with every awareness of selectivity, it must arise with a system's first-hand experience of its own history. Such a temporal horizon is related strictly to whatever events occur and to their preconditions and consequences, and will therefore virtually coincide with these events. It is therefore not worth distinguishing between time and the sequence of events. This situation occurs in the early stages of the development of psychic and social systems, in children, and in primitive societies.[20] It arises when societies experience primarily their own system-history and their need to reconsider their own history is shaped and limited by their present situation. Their way of reckoning time then remains dependent upon (more or less typified and repeatable) events in their own system-history.[21] Without a more abstract concept of time, past and future can be clearly distinguished from one another only in terms of the difference between what has just happened and what is about to happen. Very frequently in such situations we find a sharp distinction between a near and a remote past (or future). Thus, periods of time that are far away do not really belong to time, but are obscure zones where other rules of credibility and relevance are at work.[22] The reasons for this may be that experiential perspectives for a number of subjects necessarily diverge both in the present and in the immediately visible future or past. These perspectives can then be socially homogenized only within a broader temporal horizon (Royce 1968, p. 248f.). This separation of near from remote time is the easiest and most modest solution to the problem. For these societies there exists no pervasive world history (in our sense of "extrasystemic history"). From the viewpoint of this initial stage, all further development in this area takes the form of abstraction—not in the knowledge of time, but in the social experience of time.

An initial need to emphasize time as a dimension of human experience must have preceded conceptual and even mythical accounts of time (Brandon 1965). It was no doubt connected with a generalization of the religious tradition and its differentiation from the rest of society.[23] The starting point of this development is often located in the way the ancient Mesopotamian cities, in contrast to Egypt, worked out the relation between religion and politics.[24] Whether or not that is true, the need to make time into a special dimension of experience and action first arose when prominent social processes of a ceremonial or political nature began to appear as distinct phenomena, no longer being experienced as the natural course of religious events. At that point, these social processes had to bring about harmony between the cosmic and terrestrial spheres by means of human effort and good behavior. Only then did men become aware that they could fail at this job. Only then did social processes come to be experienced as somewhat *contingent* and dependent upon *variable* factors. Only then did the need arise to mitigate this contingency by creating the dual possibility of *attributing* success or failure either to divine powers or to the misbehavior of oneself or others. There then arose a dimension for successively ordering (or later simply "absorbing") events that were *selectively*, and thus *conditionally*, related to one another. We can find in the Old Testament one of the most fruitful as well as idiosyncratic cases of expanding a system-history into a world history. It is clear how this expansion rests upon the "internal contingencies" of the system. The politically tumultuous history of Israel was experienced, on the basis of the ideas we just set forth, as a contingent history of misfortunes, where other possibilities had been available. However, owing to their monotheism, the Israelites could not adequately interpret this history simply as the history of their people in a particular environment. Instead, they had to understand their external political environment as the instrument of *their own* God and view it in relation to *their own* wickedness.[25] The people's own sinfulness shattered the simple separation between system and environment in which the oppositions near/remote, familiar/foreign, and good/bad had coincided. The problem of contingency had to be put in the form of a world history spanning both the system and its environment. It required that the God of the people be generalized as the Lord of the world. In later times the prophets solved this initially social problem by means of the idea of eschatology (whose temporal structure remained nonetheless unclear). The "eschaton" is not a concept appropriate for a single people, but rather one appropriate for the world as a whole.

As in the case of other cultural abstractions,[26] the need for an abstract, relatively context-free temporal horizon is connected with an increasing differentiation of society. In such a society, which must anticipate communicative exchanges that cross system-boundaries, a system's memory of its own history is no longer by itself structurally adequate. Abstractions are needed as coordinating generalizations that permit men at least to relate, if not to integrate, different system-histories.[27] Only with reference to an abstractly measured dimension of time or fixed chronological series can a particular system's history be understood consistently with a sequence of events in its environment.[28] In other words, as systems come increasingly to be differentiated functionally, the number, variety, and interdependence of system-histories also increase so that more abstract ways to mediate them must be found. As a coordinating generalization, world time must now have the following four features: (1) *homogeneity*, or an independence from specific processes and their speeds; (2) *reversibility*, or the guarantee that we can think our way back into the past despite the irreversible course of time;[29] (3) *determinability* by means of dating and locating causal relations; and (4) *transitivity*, which allows different stretches of time to be compared.

Every conception of world time represents a response to this need for mediating among various system-histories. This is especially true of the idea that time is a linear series of temporal points. Linear time is a relatively late idea; in an abstract form it appears only in modern times.[30] To the extent that the present moment can be made to fit with abstract structures and thus can present heterogeneous futures and pasts, this idea of time allows the future and the past to be completely separated as autonomous temporal horizons. Then, whatever appears on these horizons may or may not be linked together in a continuum running through the present (see note 22). *The connection between what lies in the past and what lies in the future becomes in principle contingent.* In modern times, this contingent aspect of time came to be known as a result of medieval theological debates. It forced men to cease speaking simply of what is past and what is to come, treating them as different species of events, and to distinguish between *the future* and *the past* as horizons of selection. At this point, the link between *what* is past and *what* is to come begins to appear contingent, whereas the link between "the past" and "the future" is a necessary one. The idea of world time as an infinite series of temporal points is compatible with the assignment of different values to particular points in different system-histories. Finally, at a further level of abstraction, this idea of time can be made compatible with whatever happens at particular points in time. The concept of time no longer says anything at all about what actually happens.

Once this stage has been reached, the concept of time no longer says anything, either, about what is possible. Then, as we insisted above, our theories will have to distinguish temporal and possibilistic modalities analytically and investigate in what ways they are interdependent.

An abstract form of time that is constituted independently of all system-histories is *world time*. It is a dimension of the horizon that is the world. Because it is measured uniformly, world time allows processes in *all* systems to run *simultaneously*.[31] This makes worldwide communications possible. Nonetheless, world time is also the system-time for world society, i.e. the system of all mutually accessible human experiences and actions. The concept of world time and system-time does not destroy the difference between system and world. It is justified by the idea that society is the social system which, by reducing an indeterminate and arbitrary complexity, constitutes the world as the horizon of specific and specifiable possibilities (Luhmann 1971a; 1974a).

Whenever a very complex society has an extended, abstractly unified world time, then—according to a hypothesis advanced by Parsons—*cultural* factors take primary control over evolution.[32] However, when we retreat, with Parsons, from one-factor explanations and grant that all levels of system-building need to be preserved and developed, concepts like "control," "relative weight," or "functional primacy" become vague. The question of what factors are *dominant* will have to be replaced by the question of what factors are *critical*. One rather promising way to make these concepts more precise appears to lie in the idea of "evolutionary bottlenecks." These are points in social evolution where possibilities turn into impossibilities. At a given stage in the structural development of possibilities in different systems, we find that bottlenecks that obstruct further evolution lie increasingly in the domain of cultural factors, where there exist longer temporal horizons.

VI

An abstract measurement of time does not suffice to determine which points of time will function as past, present, or future. But it is not necessary that all the systems in society be coordinated for this to happen. To support relations among these systems there has only to be some unified procedure for determining which points in time are to be assigned to past, present, or future.[33] However, such a procedure does not exclude a complex interlocking of temporal modes. This can occur by means of a structuring technique that we may call *iterated* or *reflexive modalities.*

By this I mean that modal predicates can be modalized in turn (Meinong 1915, p. 125f.). We can talk about the possibility of actualities and about the actuality of possibilities, and even about the possibility of possibilities and the possibility of necessities, and so forth. An exact investigation of the problems of modality must focus on these iterated modalities. The same is true for temporal modalities. Augustine took at least partial advantage of that possibility by distinguishing (in his investigation of time in *Confessions XI*) between *praesens de praeteritis, praesens de praesentibus,* and *praesens de futuris.* During the Middle Ages, there arose further ways of combining modalities. For example, in the discussion of future contingents we find questions about the status of future contingents belonging to the past (Aquinas, *Questiones disputatae de veritate,* q. II, art. 12 ad septimum). However, on the whole, theological considerations seem to have favored separating temporal modalities into two levels. Human time with its division into past, present, and future was viewed as simultaneously being present to God. The relationship between these two levels was one of simultaneity and domination.

The full historicization of a uniform world time first became conceivable in the nineteenth century. By the "historicization of time" (Gent 1934) I am referring to the way temporal predicates may become reflexive by means of iterated modalities. In principle, it is clear that we can distinguish a present future from future presents—simply because the future present contains more possibilities than can be realized in any future present. Similarly, we can distinguish between future presents, present presents, and past presents. We can recognize that the presence of the past, or history, is something other than the sum of past presents. And we can also recognize that the history of a past present must take into account the present future and present past obtaining at that time, so that doubly iterated modalities must then be used. Thus, the historicization of time means that in any present's past and future horizons, presents with their own temporal horizons (i.e., their own pasts and futures) arise. Not logic, but only capacity and interest will limit how much further such iteration can be continued. Accordingly, I see the distinctive feature of modern "historical consciousness" not in a particular concern with *knowledge* of the past, but in a *temporalization* of the past. My hypothesis is that this development follows from a special interest in the future.

I am not questioning the effort, ending with Hegel, to unify and radicalize the concept of time in the idea of world history, temporalizing *everything* that exists. Its results can neither be given up nor brushed aside as belonging to a superseded historical movement. There is nothing left over when everything is thought to be in movement. Nonetheless, reflexive forms of temporality amount to more than the mere idea of a world-historical process. When the basic concept of movement is made reflexive, we get the idea of a movement of movement—i.e., acceleration or deceleration. In modern times, physical laws came to be formulated with this reflexive concept.[34] The historical sciences can go further in the use of reflexivity. By focusing on the temporal horizons of different points within the historical process, they view time itself as something temporal. Then, not only the movement of the historical process, but also its self-selectivity can be grasped. The displacement of one temporal horizon by another can be understood as a selection. It is the ability to see past presents as presents with their own futures and pasts, distinguishing them from the present present, that first made it possible to understand historical sequences of presents as selection-chains with changing futures and pasts. The selectivity of the historical process rests on the fact that, while *each* of its presents displays all of time within its temporal horizons, *none* of these views of all of time exists simultaneously with any of the others. The individuality of a historical event does not rest, as historicism assumed (Litt 1956, p. 75), merely upon its position in an irreversible and unrepeatable temporal sequence, but upon a constellation of temporal horizons, specific to the event that constitutes its selectivity.

The distinction that we have just drawn between a present past and past presents is distorted by the more usual distinction between a subjective and an objective conception of history.[35] Purely temporal concepts (as opposed to metaphysical or epistemological ones) are more suitable for clarifying what modern historical research is like. It is concerned with past presents, not with the presence of the past.[36] It tries to illuminate the past as the present it once was, thereby making society independent from its own memory. It distances the system from its own history. It knows that it lies in another present than its subject matter. By breaking with all attempts to transfer its subject matter into the present, modern historical research can allow its own interests to select the stance it will adopt toward it.[37] This kind of selectivity runs risks. But far from posing an obstacle to historical objectivity, this selectivity forms a precondition for it. We cannot adequately understand historicism if we view it simply as an intensification of historical research.[38] Instead, it is important to recognize that its particular perspective on time is neither obvious nor common. We must look into its functions and the social conditions that make it possible. Fundamentally, historicism depends upon the distinction between a present past and past presents. Hence, it is rooted in the fact that time itself has become reflexive.

In his Freiburg Lecture (1916), Martin Heidegger asked what particular concept of time belongs to the historical sciences. He sought the answer in the distinction between a quantitative, physical concept of time intended to measure motion and a historical concept of time aimed at the qualitative differences among various periods of time. His characterization of the first concept is incorrect, while that of the second is unclear, since the historical sciences are also concerned with measuring time quantitatively. Our concept of the historicization of time should take the discussion beyond this stage. In a fully historicized concept of time, past, present, and future cannot be understood as completely fixed qualities lying on a temporal axis. Nor can they be understood as partly moving and partly fixed, so that time would consist in their mutual displacement. That is, we cannot accept the old view that the future travels through a fixed present into the past, which then returns as the future, the present then connecting the other two temporal modes in a circle. Nor can we accept the modern view that the present inheres in subjective experience, proceeding with it out of the past and into the future. Instead, the temporal modalities *as a whole* must be relativized to different points in time. What moves in time is past/present/future *together*—in other words, the present along with its past and future horizons. Only on this assumption that future and past horizons get displaced along with each present moment can events be individualized in history. Dating alone does not guarantee that an event is not repeatable.[39] Historical time is constituted as the continuity and irreversibility of this movement of past/present/future as a whole. The unity of historical time lies in the fact that the past and future horizons of each present intersect with other (past or future) presents and their temporal horizons. This guarantees each present a sufficient continuity with other presents—not only temporally, but materially and socially as well (Kolaja 1969, p. 7f.).

To clarify this concept of temporal reflexivity, which unfortunately can be formulated only in a rather roundabout way, we can turn to the way temporal modalities are nonidentical. In the case of temporal modalities, nonidenticality means nonsimultaneity. It is a distinctive feature of the present to be simultaneous with the present of the present (Prior 1968, and note 31 above). Furthermore, while the present is also simultaneous with the present of the past, *it is not simultaneous with past presents*. And so neither is it simultaneous with the pasts of past presents nor with the past presents of present futures. Instead, it is simultaneous with one of the future presents of past presents.[40] The concept of the present contains rules for using the idea of simultaneity, which itself underlies the possibility of communication in social life.

By noticing how temporal modalities may thus be iterated reflexively, we can assign to different points in time both sequences of facts and different structures for institutionalizing various possibilities. This is how we can keep, while relativizing it, the principle that history must be analyzed from the vantage-point of whatever is its most recent stage.[41] In past presents we can find other vantage-points besides the present present, so that different analyses of history with different results will become possible. Social planning is another example of the need to switch vantage-points: there the present present must be analyzed as a past lying on a future present's horizons of possibility, in order to regulate present selections. Depending on whether we take the past, the present, or the future to be present, we shall determine against what structured horizon of possibilities selections are made. The historicization of time allows us to get a grip on a sequence of horizons of possibility that can be assigned to different points in world time.[42] It should encourage systems theory to develop a theory of modality that can indicate how systems generate possibilities by generalizing structures. (Such a theory is still mostly a desideratum.) Our way of understanding this matter shows that systems theory and historicism, if it faces the reflexivity of time, are complementary phenomena in a society that can sustain a corresponding complexity in its awareness of time.

We must still add some necessary complications to our theory, since even reflexive time can be treated temporally. We have to be able to investigate the history (and the future!) of time itself. For example, when and why did the concept of historicized time arise? Of course, historicism can naïvely tell its own history along the lines of the history of ideas. But, to do that, the concept of time must be held constant—a premise which is surely false. Or, time must be disregarded altogether, and then the object of this inquiry is lost. The historicization and the futurization of time first begins in modern times, roughly at the same time that political society gave way to the economic civil society of our day. Only then do linguistic tenses take on a distinctly temporal sense.[43] Only then do spatial metaphors for time, which arose because time was seen in the light of movement, begin to recede. It is the reflexivity of time that calls for a purely temporal understanding of time. It is plausible, although it would be hard to prove, that as social evolution shifted from a primarily political to a primarily economic basis the primary focus of temporal experience moved from the past to the future horizon. This development unleashed first the futurization and then the historicization of time. This is not the place to show that this is so.[44] This problem is interesting, however, because it shows that, in order to fit in with the structures of present social systems, apparently simple phenomena may depend on complex iterated modalities.

We have to think through the complications arising from these iterated modalities in order to notice a further function in the way the normal experience of time has undergone a process of abstraction to become world time. World time serves to equalize temporal relations that in themselves are quite complicated. Chronological dating helps us to transcend not only differences among system-histories, but also differences among the temporal horizons that individualize each point in time. A chronological date serves both as a substitute and a cipher for the constellation of temporal modalities individualizing that point in time.

For the time being, we shall leave open the question why societies or other social systems historicize their past system history, and approach this question by way of a detour. Reflexive temporality has a formal, though bewildering affinity with other kinds of social reflexivity that have been better investigated and are more familiar (Laing, et al. 1966). In social interaction, consciousness (or at least "modern" consciousness) forms itself through reflexive relations with others. Ego learns to see Alter not only as an object but also as a subject, as another Ego; it can then experience itself as the Alter of another Ego, perhaps even as another Ego experienced by the other Ego. Here, too, we find structures and demands on behavior that can arise only at high levels of reflexivity. Tact is one example. Here, too, we find many levels at which reflexivity may be iterated, stretching to the limits of men's capacity or interest. And here, too, ordinary language has trouble reconstructing the complicated framework of reflexive social consciousness.[45] Everyday modes of thought must resort to abbreviations, code-words (e.g., the "validity" of norms), intuitive simplifications, or even inarticulate feelings, so that with its limited resources it may do justice to the demands of social interaction (Goffman 1959; 1969).

One important question is whether social reflexivity is accompanied by "metaperspectives" which, when institutionalized, permit a high level of individual subjectivity and shared expectations without being tied down to specific kinds of expectations or specific biographies—that is, without granting them privilege! Some of the guiding symbols of bourgeois society seem tailor-made for this function: law as the compossibility of subjective freedoms, love as passion, and money. These are improbable achievements, coming late in the course of social evolution.[46] There is a similar question having to do with temporal reflexivity. Do there exist here, too, "metaperspectives" that, while giving a high level of differentiation to the temporal horizons of various systems at various times, can also orient them toward high demands for consistency and mutual support in making selections? My guess is that these meta-perspectives must be perspectives on the future, since the future is the temporal horizon with the highest complexity. Such meta-perspectives would have to be examined by a theory of planning. Because bourgeois society is expanding across the world and undergoing an immanent self-critique, we shall not find these reflexive meta-perspectives aimed toward institutional legitimation or normative programs. Instead, they are oriented toward the project of working on this reflexivity. We cannot avoid the conclusion that everyday behavior is not aware of social or temporal reflexivity, although certain possibilities in intimate relationships would be an exception. This work on reflexivity must take place in social roles that have been differentiated for this purpose: among psychiatrists, historians, and social planners. It will assume forms corresponding to the problem-situations that arise in the normal course of social life and appear to merit special treatment. We cannot trouble with the *Weltgeist* every day just because it has a position of honor.

Because our society's past and future have such a complicated temporal structure, we must face once again the questions of what are the criteria of historical relevance and what must be the theoretical structure of the historical sciences. We have already noted that memory, as a social system's recovery of the selectivity underlying past choices, has a rather limited scope. When the historical sciences undertake the same task they face the same problem. By itself, the ideal of objective, factual history would overtax these disciplines. The same is even more true for the idea that history should deal with past selections. The historical sciences will have to treat selections selectively. Only by choosing their own (scientific) criteria of selection can the historical sciences bring their capacity up to the necessary level.

When it comes to choosing such criteria, we cannot rest content merely with the irreversibility of time or the mere factuality of past history. That would leave too much open. On the other hand, theories of historical progress, which suppose that there exist normative lines of historical development, are too restrictive. It is a fact that pathological developments occur. The idea of progress cannot be introduced as a theoretical concept to deal with change, but only as a normative or political one.[47] In fact, sociology has formulated its most persuasive ideas to handle pathological developments. One possibility for systems theory would be to focus on change in the structures of social systems and to define stabilizing or destabilizing, progressive or pathological developments as *changes in those structures which determine the conditions that make further change possible.* Then we would have succeeded in formulating, however abstractly, a criterion of historical relevance: the problem to what extent selectivity is conserved in system/environment relations. Our interest in selecting criteria of relevance would focus on selectivity itself.

VII

In order to continue our analysis on a somewhat more concrete level, let us return to our point of departure—the question of how temporal structures, the need for history, and social structures are interconnected. A historian interested in the potential for selectivity lying in social systems would ask the following questions: how does the need to make sense of time and history arise from the increasing selectivity in system/environment relations? And how do social systems as a result choose their conceptions of time and history in order to develop and limit their potential for selectivity? The sense of these questions will become clear from a few examples.

1. Primitive societies at first had only the small temporal horizon that goes with simple interaction systems. As a rule, life in these societies was oriented toward the present—but not in opposition to a dissimilar past or future; it rested on a concrete, simultaneous network of lateral social relations.[48] Men became interested in more precise accounts of historical events they themselves had not experienced, *once political roles of authority were differentiated from the rest of society* and once occupants of these roles were insecure about the radius of their actions and their need for legitimacy (Schott 1968; Brundage 1954). In later societies, system-histories were at first constructed in the form of relatively short genealogies. With the development of high cultures came histories of a ruling house's deeds or politically conceived histories of the cultural group or tribe.[49] This form of history adopted a moral tone, reporting achievements and failures and actions better left undone. For example, the Bible contains characteristic reports of agreements (covenants) that are to be remembered. This development presupposed a corresponding generalization of religious ideas that permitted a sense of contingency in politics while at the same time morally evaluating it in advance. Temporal consciousness expanded. The ancient separation of mythical and genealogical time gave way to a unitary, but religiously shaped idea of history, whose continuity with the present could be made explicit.[50] Moral or even rational lessons and prescriptions for action could then be drawn from history. The low level of differentiation among the important political, religious, and economic roles was mirrored by the cosmic, religious, and moral integration of the guiding symbols of the society; the distinctly political element often became unrecognizable.[51] In general, the temporal horizons opening out from the present were extended to permit specific ethical and political achievements. For example, there arose in the realm of law the ideas of guilt and sin (which formed a temporally limited combination of selective events),[52] the phenomenon of legal jurisdiction (where the mere possibility of invoking it became a reality), promissory

notes and finally consensual contacts, which were binding on the future without having to depend on present or past events (Gernet 1956).

This kind of moral history belongs to politically constituted societies, which locate their primary evolutionary achievements and corresponding insecurities in the political area of binding decisions. This form of history makes sense so long as politics forms the basic concept of society. The political history written by Droysen and Treitschke was an anachronism—albiet understandable; with its future-oriented basic concepts of production and money, the primarily economic orientation of bourgeois society could neither reconstruct nor overcome the political conception of history. It could only neutralize this conception as an article of culture. "And even today," Karl Löwith thinks, "the natural concept of history is a political one" (Löwith 1953, p. 218). But what appears to him as "natural" is only a habit of mind.

2. Marxists claim that *scarcity*, too, makes history. Sartre has developed this idea into a remarkable analysis of the connection between scarcity and contingency (Sartre 1960, p. 200f.; Hartmann, 1966 p. 86f.). A discussion of the concept of scarcity will lead us back to systems theory's treatment of modal generalizations.

Scarcity makes history insofar as, by allowing possibilities to appear interdependent, it allows choices to take the form of benefits gained *at the cost of* something else. But scarcity is not the same for every society.[53] As a formula for contingency, it can be generalized in turn and, through the mechanism of money, it can be made independent of income, needs, and stocks of goods (Luhmann 1972). Here we find factors at work that serve to neutralize history, and these we must analyze more closely. Mechanisms of production and distribution need not figure in our view of what is relevant in the past, if for present operations it is no longer important how they made a dent in an existing stock of goods: i.e., if gratitude and merit are no longer relevant because the principles of a zero-sum game no longer apply. To this extent bourgeois society does not need history in order to operate. Whatever perspectives on history it may have can be cancelled by money, property, and contracts. It acquires something that a legally and politically constituted society, tied to a concern for legitimacy, could not acquire: basic concepts unconcerned with history. And this is the case, even if as before scarcity *makes* history.

3. The history of the system of science, an increasingly important sector of society, likewise appears as a selection made among a number of possibilities. It depends upon specifically scientific ways of projecting and conserving possibilities.

In many ways, the history of science is understood today as a history of problems, of how they have been posed and solved. The general difference between a horizon of possibilities and the selection of what counts as real is seen here as the difference between problems and solutions. It is assumed that each problem admits of several possible solutions, which presupposes in turn that, whatever the specific solutions, we can give the conditions under which the problem can be solved. The status of the basic concepts of science—e.g., the concepts of the possible truth or falsity of a proposition, perceptibility, verifiability, falsifiability, capability of being operationalized, measurability—has not yet been adequately clarified in the philosophy of science.[54] Yet even without this clarification, actual research can work with these unanalyzed concepts and make history.

Just as in the case of economic scarcity, we must ask why scientific research should have need of its own history. One answer would be that scientific research will then be able to avoid repeating past errors and to build on the basis of the corrections it has made (Bachelard 1960). This can best be done by means of concepts that are adequate to present-day society and that, like money, cancel out history. An awareness of the history of problems in science would then have the function of conserving possibilities—of remaining at a level of abstraction where we are aware that every solution to a problem is contingent.

4. Macrosociological theories have overlooked one very important and instructive example of the way social systems now need history: *love stories*. I do not mean how *other* people talk about love affairs, but rather the need that the lovers themselves have for history. Romantic, passionate love—the cultural norm by which in bourgeois society emotions are felt, love affairs take their course, and families are founded—shows well-known signs of instability

both in its code and in the behavior it causes (Burgess 1927; Waller and Hill 1951, pp. 93–215; Aubert 1965, pp. 201–35). Instability, chance, unconditionality, passion, and hence insecurity are legitimated in order to ensure a broad horizon for the socially uncontrolled choice of partners. In addition, love does not require that any rights and duties be specified, nor does sexuality require that each other's performances be measured. This highly indeterminate horizon of possibilities is reduced to a set of somewhat secure expectations through a mix of strategy and history. The strategy aims at producing a history that cements the relationship.[55] In love, we can enter into a series of selections that at first are independent of history. We love independently of what has gone on before. But history is still needed, first as a proof of love, and then as a substitute for it. History confirms the gradual process in which two people come to choose each other, but then, unnoticed, the burden of proof comes to rest on the partner who wants to leave: he or she can no longer simply appeal to love, but must give reasons for that decision.

These short analyses, chosen on purpose from different subsystems of functionally differentiated societies,[56] show that the occasions and horizons on which system-histories are selected vary with how these systems generate possibilities and guide selections. If this is so, we cannot expect to get an account of the meaning and function of system-histories that is both universally valid and informative.

VIII

Nonetheless, I shall make a second attempt. The question of what role history should play can be turned on its head. How can we get rid of history once the development of society has made it indispensable as the horizon of possibilities for present action and experience? How can we make history, now relevant, once again into something we can ignore? How can we make the present independent of what brought it about and still is at work in it? By turning our original question around, we gain the well-known advantage of negative questions: by limiting themselves to how something may be eliminated, they can allow positive interdependences that are too complex to remain vague (Aristotle, *Topics*, 117a5f.). In order to make these questions precise, we must take for granted that the relevant systems are structured. We shall not view "forgetting" as a natural process of disburdening ourselves. Instead, our point of departure will be a society that, to a certain extent, inhibits forgetfulness and keeps present a history of the world and itself that forms one context in which all experience and action become meaningful. In such a rather overdocumented society, there are institutions and mechanisms that, as opposed to history, produce a *relatively free context* for present choices. History would then no longer need to be used directly as a structure for determining meaning, as is inescapably the case in simple systems. We can distance ourselves from history by constructing and reducing inordinate complexity in specific ways.

Edmund Husserl had the contrary interest in reconstructing the whole history of the acts of consciousness that originally bestowed meaning upon things (Husserl 1954; Blumenberg 1963; Hohl 1962). Thus, he characterized the attempt to abstract from subjectivity and historicity as "technologization." Husserl was able to formulate the problem of the relation between technology and history quite differently than did those who defined technology in terms of production or by means of a distinction between the natural and the social sciences. "Technology" relieves us not only of our own manual operations. In a broader sense, it unburdens us from rehearsing the subjectivity and historicity underlying the meanings things bear. We are thereby able to acquire a wider range of possibilities and a greater selectivity. What Husserl saw as a loss of meaning and as a European crisis, has another side as a condition for increasing our capacities.

This other side of "the loss of meaning" will become clearer if we note first that the sense of expressions referring concretely to subjects or points in time is limited to simple systems of immediate interaction and to situational awareness (Garfinkel and Sacks 1970, p. 348f.). But expressions like "I," "you," and "we" can be replaced by names that everyone can use, and references to "yesterday," "today," and "a long time ago" can be replaced by dates. Similarly, the evolutionary process we described above as system-differentiation, which distinguishes system-histories and world history, also constructs relatively context-free systems of symbols that in the long run can even become independent of their own history. Technologization is this second evolutionary stage of symbol-construction that follows upon the construction of context-free languages. Selection processes must now adapt to the horizons of a society that is very complex and rich in possibilities. By and large, technologization makes the past appear as settled and finished, no longer immediately present like the abiding dead or the continuity of guilt.

We can best learn from examples how technology distances, neutralizes, and objectifies history. We shall look first at organizational structures that work by identifying *positions*—abstract loci where the identification of roles allows persons, problems, and organizational directives to be altered (Luhmann 1964, p. 141f.). Identifying a position allows us to make technical decisions that interrupt its continuity: in any position persons, problems, or organizational directives can be switched, although not all at the same time. For example, the constraints governing the choice of a new person for a position lie not in the present occupant but in the position's problems and directives, which are kept constant. They lie not in the *temporal* dimension, but in its *material* compatibility with the position's other parameters, which can be checked by appeal to the position's identity.

We have been discussing what is technically possible for an organization. But, in fact, this neutralization of history only partially takes place. Especially in the case of highly personalized roles (e.g., old-style professorships or leadership positions) the former occupant can have an effect on his successor. For example, Horst Baier—despite his protests—was designated "Adorno's successor" (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, December 16, 1971, p. 2). The opportunity to distance oneself from one's predecessor thus depends on the position in question and the historical situation. To a certain extent, such a change actually demands that a comparison be made, that the past occupant of the position be remembered, or even that he become the subject of a myth (Gouldner 1954a and b; Guest 1962; Grusky 1960, 1961, 1963). Hence, a distancing from history—even in a technically advanced form—need not be a lapse into primitive ahistoricity, or into a dismantling or forgetting of the past.

Instead, our example shows that the technical neutralization of history serves the function not of excluding but of specifying what is historically relevant. This depends on a fundamentally ambivalent relation to the past. On the one hand, we can assume either a positive or a negative attitude toward the past (for example, we can measure the present occupant of a position against a good or a bad predecessor). On the other hand, by differentiating various levels of possible action we can operate in a way that is both free of history and attached to it at the same time. For example, in "formal organizations" our actions can be free of history, while in "informal organizations" our actions can be attached to it.[57] *It seems that only if these two levels are structurally differentiated can one of them provide particular ways of both negating and specifying the relevance of the past.*

These interconnected aspects of the technical neutralization of history appear in other examples. Like positions, money is utilizable independently of history—i.e., independently of the context in which it was earned.[58] To be more exact, this is true only of liquid assets. However, if we understand by money the totality of goods and services, insofar as they are expressed in monetary terms (i.e., subjected to the code of money), then we have to recognize that for the most part money is invested and hence tied down by history. There is a specific economic significance to the way money is tied down by history, for it takes the form not of a present past or a past present, but instead of an inevitable future. It is the conditions underlying economic calculation that make this possible—for example, the rules that govern the writing off of debts. Liquid funds constitute only the critical form of money that allows the whole economy to handle the relation between future and past in this specific way. They provide the means for, not skirting, but calculating how good past investments will not hinder better future ones.

Our third example is the *positivity of law*. This is the phenomenon that law is valid by virtue of decisions, and not simply because it once was established (that corresponds to the ancient Greek concept of *thesmos* and similar concepts in many early high cultures), but because it can be changed at any time. When this possibility is not utilized, it is presumed that the law is correct (Luhmann

1970b; 1972). Here, too, we see how the neutralization of history allows problems to be shifted from one level to another. The age of law affects neither its validity, nor its quality. The opposite thesis is also incorrect; new law is not necessarily better than old law. What is decisive is that the validity of the law does not rest upon our looking back into history. It rests upon our ability to change the law now and in the future, in a way that is compatible with whatever history may be like.

But the possibility of changing the law functions as a sign of its correctness only if we really can change the law. And we can change it only if the organizational, political, and conceptual prerequisites for the continual scrutiny of the law have been created. They must be anchored in the structures of particular social systems. We are still far from this situation. That is why in law, too, there exists a level at which organizational, political, and informational factors make impossible much that is legally possible. This is a state of affairs that a technical critique of present-day society might attack, claiming that it holds on to too much of the past, not indeed in the form of history, but as a status quo (Luhmann 1968d).

Finally, we shall turn to some examples from the area of scientific research. Historical research is a prime example. Insofar as it does not simply recount, heroize, or adapt the currently accepted views of the past, it understands itself as an objective means for neutralizing history. The very idea of giving a new and untraditional account of the past is quite rare in the history of society. I have already mentioned that through historical research a society becomes more or less independent from its own memory; if it does maintain its memory, it is only because that memory is serving other functions. In addition, historical research may succeed in neutralizing interests that govern how decisions are currently being made.[59]

In a somewhat different sense, we can also understand systems theory as a technical neutralization of history. It sets up several levels of relations toward history, and on at least one of them it develops particular ways of negating and specifying history.[60] To do this, it must be able to analyze temporal forms of reflexivity. Obviously, it is not then denying the causal importance of events in the past, either for the systems it studies or for theories themselves. Neutralization of history means only that it sets up an indirect and ambivalent relation to the past, in which the attention paid to past events may vary from case to case.

As a system of research, systems theory can develop other possibilities then the ones allowed by the structures of the systems it studies. To exaggerate, we could say that here knowledge is possible precisely because of what is impossible in the systems it studies: it is concerned with the "structural constraints" operating in those systems. A systems-theoretic analysis of systems theory would thus have to look at what the program of systems theory makes impossible. (We should not forget that for systems theory the concepts of possibility and impossibility are not logical or absolute, but always take into account the structural conditions of possibility.) A systems-theoretic analysis of present-day systems theory would have to deal especially with the impossibility of doing research into highly structured complexity. By referring to such an analysis of *present-day* systems theory, I am indicating that at this level of reflexivity systems theory must treat its object temporally, in order to see its modal generalizations in relation to other possible ones.

Through the simultaneous use of various, reflexively linked conceptual levels, which can refer to various levels of self-reflection in social systems, we can simultaneously assume a number of attitudes toward history. We can write the history of politically constituted societies in the form of a political history. And systems theory can help us to analyze why in societies where political functions have primacy history takes place politically. Our ability to undertake these analyses *simultaneously* is one way in which those past societies which possessed a corresponding analytic capacity are still present. However, it is a completely different question how past presents would have looked.

IX

The view that history is simply equivalent to the past is inadequate. As the temporal modalization of systems, history is not an object in itself. It is a temporal horizon that always points to the other horizon of the future. Thus, historical research cannot leave the future out of account. The incompleteness of the view that history is simply the past becomes clearer when we consider both temporal reflexivity and the technical neutralization of temporal horizons. We then see how complicated and various are the possible ways of treating history.

Professional historians have to select particular past presents in the present past. The future horizon then comes to play a number of roles: as the future of our present, which allows historical research to objectify history technically; as the future present of the past present being studied; and as the present future of that past present. Thus, the historian cannot simply assume that the future of the Greek polis lay in the Roman Empire. If he did, he would be utilizing the perspective that his own present gives on world history. Instead, he must distinguish that future (a present that then was still to come and now belongs to the past) from the present future that belonged to the Greek polis. The possibilities open to the Greek polis were restricted by the repeated nomothesia, the resistance of the economy to being incorporated into society, the small scale of this political system that excluded widespread peace, etc. This distinction between future presents and the present future which has to be projected back into a past present must force the historian to use systems analysis, understanding a past system's own future as a modal generalization of its underlying structures. Otherwise, he will confuse the present future as it was experienced then with the presents that lay in the future.

We can apply the same interdependence of future and past horizons to our present society and its temporal perspectives. We then must ask how a social system has to arrange its present future and present past, in order that time can become reflexive and temporal horizons can be neutralized. In sketching the genesis of the modern conception of time, we have already anticipated the answer to this question. Such a society must let its future horizon dominate. The selections made with regard to the future have to be more important than those made with regard to the past.

This idea has to be made more precise. What is new about modern society lies neither at the causal nor at the normative level. Instead, there has been a change in the temporal horizon that primarily controls present selections. Present selections are chiefly made with an eye no longer to past but to future selections. The present is understood as the past of future, contingent presents; its choices are seen as preliminary choices in an area of future contingency. The concern with consistency, which strengthens chains of selections, brings the present together, no longer with the past, but with the future. That is why the future becomes explicit as the horizon for making selections. That is why in modern times one tradition of modal theory has collapsed, the one that saw the reduction of what is logically possible to what is actual in the world as a process lying in the *past*: creation and not evolution (Pape 1966; 1968, pp. 266–87). This is the context in which the important conceptions of causality, goals, and values began to change. For example, goals are no longer understood as the present culmination of a process of development. Instead, they are conceived as a present choice of a contingent future.

The structural conditions for this change should be sought in changes that led to the creation of a surplus of possibilities that could be located only in the future. These conditions include, especially, extensive functional differentiation, the great autonomy of subsystems, and abstract functional perspectives and media that led to incongruent and overdrawn possibilities being projected in the subsystems of society. Societies with these structural features open up their future to make room for more than one possible present for each point in the future. They aim to make compatible the possibilities projected by various subsystems by locating them all in the realm of what is possible in the future. Law and truth, politics and the economy, scientific research and education, personal emancipation and organization can only be made compatible if their lines of development are projected into a contingent future. This, in turn, encourages contrary claims, expectations, and selection strategies in the present. The realm of what is possible in the future has a greater capacity for absorbing complexity. It is compatible with a greater number of different situations in society. And that is precisely the reason why there has been a change in which the temporal horizon of the future assumes a commanding position. Only the future can give our orientation toward time a degree of complexity that matches the structural complexity of present-day society.

If we assume that for this reason time itself had to become more complex—i.e. autonomous, objectifiable, and reflexive, then we can characterize the historicism of modern society as a reflex of its attitude toward the future. This is not a new idea (Löwith 1953, p. 230f.; 1955; Erdmann, 1964). But we can formulate it today without appealing to a linear, teleological understanding of the future. That is why it is worthwhile to have a history in the first place—because, while determining the conditions for present possibilities, history has no goal.

14

The Self-Thematization of Society

A Sociological Perspective on the Concept of Reflection

In the classical "philosophy of reflection," reflection itself was intimately associated (as a process) with the intentional "movement" of thinking, and (as a substance) with the idea of an underlying subject that unfolds and asserts itself in "the thinking of thinking." The concept of reflection was thus defined by reference to the purportedly more fundamental concept of the thinking subject. As a category, in other words, it presupposed an interest in the attribution of agency.[1] The question "Who reflects?" was already answered in the very idea of reflection. The subject reflects. The subject, in turn, is primarily that which sustains its identity in "the thinking of thinking." Whenever we think, we simultaneously think *that* we think. All thinking, as a consequence, is accompanied by a higher-order act of thinking about thinking which cannot itself be thought away. Early modern philosophy, in its attempt to conceptualize such an entity, refurbished the old notion of a substratum (or *sub-iectum*: "that which lies underneath"), removing it from what had previously been an exclusively objective context. In this tradition, as a result, the "subject" was *not* conceived as a human being (or nonhuman being?) with all that this entails. Despite the technical philosophical meaning of the word "subject," however, sociological deployments of the term inevitably lapse into anthropomorphism. The subject is frequently accorded language and freedom, or at least the right to freedom. To the greatest extent possible, or so we learn, the subject must be "emancipated," must "participate" in politics, must be "represented," and so forth—as if these Roman and Medieval concepts could reach the high level of abstraction characterizing the modern philosophical conception of the subject.

If sociological treatments of the problem of reflection necessarily involved a travesty of the concept of "the subject," it would be best to quit trying. In any case, the subject is no object, so what is it doing in our theories? The last sanctuary of the subject, one might even argue, is the style with which a theorist arranges and beautifies his material. And that is surely something to be kept under control!

Fortunately, there is another possibility. We can try to retain and generalize what has been gained by the level of abstraction already achieved in the modern philosophical concept of the subject. The aim of such an approach would neither be a "rebirth of the subject" nor a demand for the realization of its hitherto unattained freedoms (Oelmüller, 1972). Rather, its purpose would be to transform and supersede the concept of the subject in a generalization of its form. This involves stretching the technical concept of the subject so that it refers to the foundation of all processes and systems within which "meaning" plays an essential role.

In what follows, an attempt will be made to borrow the category of reflection and apply it to societies.[2] This requires us to make some perhaps excessively abstract preliminary statements claiming even wider applicability than the theory of society. At any rate, the framework for our analysis here will be the general theory of meaning-generating systems.

I

Reflection is the most improbable case of a widespread technique of *relating* or *establishing relations*. Relating (in this special sense) means that something originally given in a unified, concrete, and compact way is replaced by a relation or chain of relations.[3] Through the establishment of relations, the referential structure of life world horizons is specified, schematized, and made available for progressive operations of action and experience.[4] This is only meaningful to the extent that the things "related" to one another are thereby treated as *contingent*. "Contingent" means that interrelated items could also be other than they are. Like all modal concepts, the concept of contingency depends on specifiable *conditions of possibility* which restrict the complexity and randomness of other possibilities.[5] Such structural conditions for the possibility of other possibilities are presupposed in the very idea of a relation. They assume the form of the *context* within which a relation first receives an understandable and communicable meaning. The context determines the special character of a relation. It allows relations to become (for this context) *noncontingent relations between contingent relata*. Such meaning-bestowing contexts can be *abstracted* and, sociologically speaking, *differentiated* from ordinary situational contexts, to the extent that they provide structured access to a wider range of other specified possibilities.

Traditional examples of "relation-building" associated with a specific context are (a) morality which gives a conditional (or "if . . . then . . .") structure to reciprocal human esteem, (b) law which provides a similar conditional structure for the making of binding decisions, (c) means/ends rationality, (d) the symbolic codes of the most important media of communication: truth, love, money, and power. Accompanying the emergence of such semi-autonomous contexts and the broadening of the range of possibilities they make accessible is a need for *criteria of consistency between discrete acts of "relating."* This simply represents a need for establishing relations between various acts of establishing relations. It occurs on a metalevel where the initially noncontingent relations between contingent relata can, in their turn, be treated as contingent. Examples of such criteria are justice and economic efficiency or optimality. Justice is here no longer conceived as equality in relations of exchange and remuneration (an eye for an eye or equivalents for equivalents). Rather, justice is understood as the overall consistency between various distinct acts of relating legal premises to legal consequences. Likewise, economic efficiency is no longer exclusively understood as maximizing the profit on one's expenditures. Rather it is conceived as optimizing the relations between various possible relations among expenditures and profits.[6]

These forms of relating and establishing relations between various acts of relating are well entrenched in various sectors of social action. With this abstract framework in mind, we can return to the central issue of our concern. *Reflection* may now be defined as *the process through which a system establishes a relationship with itself.* As a result, we can also (and more suggestively) refer to reflection as "self-thematization." Self-thematization makes the unity of a system accessible to the system's parts—be these subsystems, subsidiary processes, or occasional acts. To this extent, reflection is a form of participation. While a part certainly cannot *be* the whole, it can *thematize* the whole insofar as it perceives it as a meaning-generating system and relates it to an excluded and thereby delimited environment.

Both individual personality systems and social systems can "thematize" themselves. It is necessary to distinguish these two types of system, because the self-thematization of social systems cannot be reduced to the self-thematization of individuals. These preliminary considerations, in fact, might allow us to redefine the traditional concept of the subject as a sort of cultural "prescription" for individual self-thematization. On the basis of this redefinition, we might also inquire into the evolutionary and sociostructural preconditions for the possibility of such a prescription and into its wider implications. For our present purpose, however, these questions can be left unanswered. We are only concerned here with the self-thematization of social systems.

Before we confront this topic directly, we must ask about the *context* within which this self-reflexive form of "relating" can be successfully established. In what context is self-thematization possible—that is, in what context can it have a specific communicable meaning?

It only becomes necessary (and, for that matter, possible) to recognize or identify a system when this system is distinguished and demarcated from its environment. The proper context for the relation of self-thematization, as a result, is provided by *the discon-*

tinuity between a system and its environment. Discontinuity is not only a prerequisite for identification. It has a further consequence: a system identified as a *unity* is able to develop a *multiplicity* of different relations to its environment. Within the process of reflection, focusing on the unity of a system makes this multiplicity of system/environment relations easier to manage. It serves as the basic reference point for a selective reduction and mastery of environmental complexity. To the extent that the unity of a system is made an explicit topic in reflection, the system itself becomes capable of making meaningful choices even in what is for it an indeterminate and unexplored environment.

Self-thematization, in sum, requires that a system become a topic within itself *as a system in an environment.* For individuals, becoming a topic in this way means becoming an object for consciousness. For social systems, it means becoming the object of thematically unified communication. Thematizations presuppose a horizon of other possibilities and they open up a structured or prepatterned and orderly access to these various distinct possibilities.[7] At the same time, the discontinuity between a system and its environment makes it possible both to distinguish internal from external horizons and to set these horizons in relation to one another. As an element within this relation, the system becomes a topic that can be clearly focused upon inside the system. Moreover, as but one element within a relation, the self-thematizing system becomes contingent for itself. For example, it may be consciously varied and strategically adapted to meet changing conditions in its environment.

Such a self-reflexive relation can be successfully achieved without exhaustive research into the full complexity of a system's external and internal horizons.[8] Indeed, *self-thematization is only possible because such total knowledge is unnecessary.*

Relations must always be kept distinct from the contexts which make relation-building possible. Thus, in the special case of reflection, the "thematic" relation of a system to itself must be distinguished from the system/environment relation. Indeed, the possibility of reflection depends on the nonidentity of these two relations. Their conflation would not lead to *reflection* but to *projection*, to a system's "seeing" itself in its environment while remaining incapable of making itself into a topic there. The possibility of reflection, in other words, depends on dismantling a system's "projective" relation to its environment. In the case of society, this entails a desocialization of nature.[9] Self-thematization, because it presupposes this and other complex achievements, is a relatively late development in social evolution.

We can arrive at similar results by taking a second path, which begins with the reflexivity of processes. By "reflexivity" I mean, in counterdistinction to reflection, the application of a process to itself or to a process of the same kind.[10] Reflexivity requires functional specification (for example, the identification of a process as *thinking* and not as loving, purchasing, appreciating, washing up, and so forth). Otherwise, the lasting identity of the process itself could not be defined. Functional specification, in turn, requires the drawing of boundaries as a guarantee that the specified process will remain identical to itself. Reflection too, as we just saw, requires that boundaries be drawn. We can therefore assume that reflexivity and reflection are closely interconnected. Systems theory, it turns out, can clarify this interconnection. It can even do so on the basis of those classic examples that start with the "processing" of subjective experience, examples initially developed by the "philosophy of consciousness" in the second half of the eighteenth century: the thinking of thinking, the willing of willing, the choosing of choosing, or, in general, the selection of selections.

Normally, the "processing" of experience is governed by reference to an objective topic or theme, not by reference to an ego. "The ideas themselves prevail, not the 'I.'" (Gallagher 1964, p. 485). Ordinarily, as a consequence, there exists little *centralized control* over what is experienced or said. As the reflexivity of such a process increases (that is, when it begins to govern itself by reference to its own identity as a process) the identity of its underlying "carrier" system suddenly becomes visible and can even be made into an explicit topic. For this purpose, it is not sufficient that the premises which structure the "processing" of subjective experience be thematized and categorized as concepts or principles or ideas. The act of experiencing only becomes self-oriented when its premises are perceived *in their function* as the underlying structure of the process, that is, when their purpose and their way of fulfilling it are simultaneously laid bare. Such a functional interpretation of the premises underlying the "processing" of experience presupposes (for its own governance) premises of a higher order. The successive appeal to higher-order premises ultimately leads to a superpremise, which can only be transcended by negation.

Early modern philosophers thought they could block this infinite regress by hypostatizing the interconnectedness of reflexive processes, thus *making their negation impossible.* The traditional European formula for this strategy was unity in diversity (*varietas*). Unity in diversity was held to be equivalent to rational intelligibility. This notion survived in an unbroken tradition down through Marx's concept of the concrete.[11] The original formula was bound up with the problem of theodicy, that is, with the question of how to handle the threat posed by something negative.[12] The model answer was initially provided by theology. In the early modern era, this exemplary position was commandeered by formulae linked to specific systems or processes. The psychological reflexivity of thinking, willing, and feeling, for example, was hypostatized as "the subject" unable to negate itself. Similarly, it became a last-ditch source of certainty in an unstable world. The normative regulation of norms through successively higher-order laws was said to culminate in the concept of a "sovereign State," against whose justice and law there could be no justified sanction. In both cases, the "relation between a system and its hypostatization"[13] or the relation between variety and its essential unity remained obscure. Indeed, this obscurity was doubtless one of the preconditions for the effectiveness of the postulated *impossibility* of negating either consciousness or the State. The question we now need to ask is this: must self-thematization necessarily take the form of a self-hypostatization?

In order to explore other possibilities, we must begin (according to this analysis) with the concepts of *susceptibility and immunity to negation.* For this purpose, we must return briefly to our opening remarks about the technique of establishing relations.

All experience and action in which meaning plays an essential role depends upon a pre-existent world devoid of positive and negative qualities. As soon as this "immediate" world is recast into a set of explicit relations, however, it must also be reconstructed and transformed into something that *cannot be negated*, that is, into noncontingent relations between contingent relata. The distinction between system and environment is helpful for clarifying this point. Experiential processes that thematize the function of their own underlying premises require that their capacity for negation can be turned inward. This means that it can be directed not only toward environmental data but also toward premises internal to the system. Therefore, *what becomes immune to negation is the very possibility of self-negation*, since negating it would also presuppose it.

The reflexivity of processes ultimately implies this impossibility of negating their capacity for self-referential negations. Even the nonemployment of this capacity is only possible as a *decision* not to employ it.[14] Reflexivity, in the final analysis, presupposes neither the perfection nor the hypostatization of the system, but only this impossibility of its negating its own potential for self-negation. If a system becomes aware of this situation, important consequences follow for the meaning and possibility of its self-thematization. It can then comprehend itself only by explicit reference to the noncontingency of this contingency.

Theologians have no doubt had the most ample experience with the noncontingency of the contingent (Deku 1956). If we understand reflection as an "intentional act" (for instance, as the thinking of a perfect or hypostatized unity), then we *must* also attribute a sort of "supermodal necessity" to its unity. If, instead, we understand reflection as (in the suggested sense) the establishment of a relation, then the question becomes one about noncontingent relations between contingent relata. It then becomes possible to distinguish between the relation of a system to itself and the relation of a system to its environment. The second relation provides a context for the definition of the first, and thus guarantees its relative noncontingency. It is only because a system has an environment that it can relate itself to itself. Self-selection is made possible by the double experience of influencing and adapting to an environment. This explains why a system can only thematize itself and its structures as contingent when it simultaneously relates itself to a contingent environment and finds a noncontingent principle in this relation (and not in itself). Such a principle postulates that contingency can only be constituted as *double* contingency, as the difference between a system and its environment.

Such an approach to the problem presupposes that we can make sufficiently precise the context within which this establishment of self-reflexive relations takes place—that we can elaborate a theory of systems. In what follows I shall first consider some classic historical examples of the self-thematization of society (II) and then, on this basis, endeavor to formulate more abstract contextual conditions for the self-thematizations of societies (III-IV).

II

All historical examples of the self-thematization of society have been accomplishments *of* society. In other words, reflection has never been foisted on society from the outside, but has always been achieved by society itself. Both the necessity and the possibility of thematizing society emerge as a result of society's own development. A history of thoughts and concepts concerning society, written as pure intellectual history, would therefore be an abstraction. The literary tradition, in point of fact, is a precipitate of society's own past reflection—which is not to deny that Hegel was the first to articulate the idea of "the history of reflection" and that Marx was the first to ascribe the history of reflection to society as a moment in its self-thematization.

The preconditions which set in motion society's self-reflection are usually interpreted within this history. Nonetheless, they do not automatically become the object of theoretical consideration in a way that fosters awareness of alternatives and possibilities for fundamental restructuring. The historically classic self-thematizations of society were all formulated with retrospective knowledge about the advanced evolutionary stage at which society had arrived, but not, in a planning-minded way, in anticipation of a different sort of future. Only an evolutionarily late theory of society, which simultaneously reflects upon the history of society's self-reflection, and explicitly relates it to its preconditions, is able to formulate categories that are abstract enough to hold open the future and keep its openness steadily in view.

I must now introduce various concepts which will only be explicated and justified later on. The self-thematization of society, I begin by assuming, varies *temporally* with the stage of social evolution, *materially* with the degree of social differentiation, and *socially* with the symbolic generalization of distinct media of communication. The state of society in these three respects establishes conditions and limitations for possible reflection and lays down which goals can be systematically pursued. Society's capacity for self-understanding depends upon the historical combination of these three variables.

The original impulse toward a thoroughgoing understanding and description of society arose in connection with the transition from archaic settlements and tribal communities to collectivities of greater magnitude. Such larger collectivities were constituted and held together *politically* and were thus essentially characterized by a capacity for making binding decisions. This transition to a politically anchored social order did not merely extend society's capacity for integrating group activities—which, of course, primitive communities already possessed. More significantly, it introduced (by concentrating power and authority) *the possibility of resolving conflicts through binding decisions.* Therefore, it made it experientially obvious that the social whole does not result from spontaneous or "natural" living together, but rather, in certain respects, presupposes contingency and requires the deliberate overcoming of contingency.

The crucial status of the problem of contingency can be clearly perceived in two dissociations which became necessary at this point in history: (1) In politically organized societies, the relation between politics and religion was significantly slackened. Thus, the exercise of authority through prominent roles was no longer *eo ipso* a religious activity. Although political acts were still legitimated in religious terms, they were now recognized as containing their own (specifically political) potential for good or evil.[15] (2) There arose a demand for a *strictly political* history of chains of events, which replaced the archaic fusion of mythical and genealogical time.[16]

When society was organized politically, contingency was thought to lie primarily in human action and was generalized as the contingency of action. The emergence of relatively discrete roles or role-systems for political action rendered possible the experience (and, eventually, the anticipation of the experience) that political action is planned and carried out in the presence of other available options. In order to transmit preselected and reduced possibilities for action from one person to another, society required and constituted "power"—a specialized, symbolically generalized medium of communication that came into play when language and common beliefs about the world no longer sufficed for the coordination of social action. Society, at this point, took on the structure of a hierarchy of authority. The formulae for dealing with contingency and the symbolic generalizations of the "power code" were simultaneously (1) characteristic accomplishments of social evolution, that is, cultural innovations which were originally highly improbable, (2) central problems for self-thematization, and (3) starting points for further evolution. As a result, the self-interpretation of this society as essentially political played a crucial role in subsequent social evolution.

For politically organized societies, as has been suggested, the root of the problem lay initially in the contingency of human action. Within subjective experience, a fundamental feeling was retained that there is no alternative to the present state of the world. Thus, the recalcitrant experiences which had to be absorbed and interpreted were the following: that we can act in a different manner than impulse or habit suggests; that we could have acted differently than we did, with other consequences and in pursuit of other aims; that others can act differently than they do. Through such experiences, action was cast into a "relational" position. It came to be seen as an intermediary step between given situations and eventual consequences. This "relational" perspective on action furnished actors with conscious access to alternatives and to flexibility. As suggested above, however, such "relating" always requires a context to guarantee meaning and interpretability to the relation in question. To satisfy this need for a context, politically organized societies developed a *generalized morality* which institutionalized relatively universal (or relatively situation-free) rules for interpersonal respect or mutual esteem. On the strength of such rules, these societies "moralized" their religion, their law, their history, and their cosmos and could therefore legitimate political authority, *although and because* they provided explicit access to other alternatives. "Morality" offered a solution to the problem of the contingency of human action because it could be formulated with direct reference to action and because (through generalized premises) it gave a unified answer to this "although and because."

It is easy to ascertain, on the basis of the broad historical overview possible today, that there exists a wide spectrum of heterogeneous (but not random!) possibilities for reacting thematically and institutionally to this situation. As a result, the starting points for a self-thematization of society are equally various. In China, the crucial relation between politics and morality developed, under the special conditions of the "warring kingdoms," into an opposition between political efficiency and traditional or customary moral codes. This opposition, in turn, was articulated and extended in the scholastic dispute between Legists and Confucians and was politically decided in favor of the latter—something which ruled out social integration on the basis of an increase in freedom. What distinguished the early high cultures of the Middle East, on the other hand, was that political contingency was primarily thematized in relation to religious powers and forces, and that moralization and the capacity for making contracts drove universalization upward toward monotheism—a process that could and did result in political catastrophes. For this reason, solutions to the problem of contingent human action were here provided primarily through religious postulates rather than through political or legal institutions, for example, through the idea of a league between God and a chosen people, and a bridging of the discrepancy between a monotheistic God and the political and social destiny of His particular people through eschatology.

Only in the Greek city-states did a self-thematization emerge that directly spoke to the evolutionarily decisive factor (i.e., the political organization of society) and explicitly included the moralization of contingent action by means of a new, post-archaic "ethos." It is difficult to say why this happened precisely here. Perhaps an important role was played by the fact that in Greece there was no need to consolidate political decision-making from scratch. As a result, this process may have been released from the peculiar preconditions necessary for fostering totally unprecedented developments. After the breakdown of Mycenaean culture, at any rate, the consolidation of political decision-making had only to be reconstructed—by second hand, as it were—with a greater degree of freedom and with a chance for conscious deviation from earlier patrimonial and household models of political authority. Be this as it may, the Greek polis was eventually portrayed in all its beauty and orderliness as a "political society,"[17] that is, as a city which rendered itself capable of making decisions, with the help of specific public offices and through the free actions of all citizens, who (in turn) made their choices with a view to the good and the just.

We do not need to inquire here about the descriptive accuracy or realism of this formula or about its hidden victims. Its success lay less in its closeness to reality than in its closeness to the problem of contingency. It highlighted the aspect of society that had already become explicitly contingent: politics. As a result, it launched the European tradition of ethical-political thinking about society. Far into the modern era, society continued to be understood as a *civitas sive societas civilis* (Riedel 1965) and even the derivative idea of *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* appears, when viewed superficially, as a mere revamping of the old concept. For the same reason, political *potestas* remained the pivotal concept of social theory. Following the same tradition, the "natural" boundaries of morality, law, and politics (which limited the contingency of action) furnished the theoretical context within which reflection about society took place. These factors determined what could be put in relation with what. Ideological changes were accomplished inside this framework. Even the widening rift, in the Middle Ages, between territorial politics and a religiously grounded social ethics (which mirrored the indisputable realities of political and Church organizations) did not shatter this framework (Maier 1962). Instead, it made possible the development of a moral theology bound to the practice of confession but independent of politics (and in this respect free from civic responsibility). This moral theology was only able to influence politics by influencing persons—but no longer through the self-thematization of society. The religious wars accelerated the tendency for politics to neutralize itself with respect to religion. This required a higher degree of generalization in formulae for social integration, that is, more abstract premises about nature or human nature or reason. Even in the epoch of early bourgeois contractarianism (*Vernunftsrecht*) society was still conceptualized as a "body" capable of acting like a person. This capacity for "action" could only be sustained through *politics*. One or a few must act for all, and they must be obliged and bound (how else?) through morality and law. Thus, down through the modern period, the peculiar amalgam of morality, law and politics remained the dominant focus for reflection on society.

This situation carried with it special restrictions on reflection. The self-thematization of society could detach itself neither from its moral premises nor from its alignment with "man's highest good," so long as action in general was understood in ethical terms. This, in turn, remained necessary so long as society could be "acted for" and no other (nonethical) contexts were available which could bestow meaning on a "relational" decomposition of action into ends and means, into contingency, and into availability for discretionary use. The social preconditions reigning in Europe prior to the eighteenth century made overtures to amoral reflection not impossible, but indeed certainly immoral. Even purely political reflection, as all Machiavellians must have experienced, could not escape being evaluated in moral terms. A higher level of reflection was simply missing. The topmost elements, those immune to negation, were fixated within morality. Thus, the relevance of morality could in no case be negated—neither by being repudiated in its entirety nor even by being held gingerly in abeyance. The moral disjunction between "good" and "bad" actions could not be employed without expressing an inherent preference. Lacking was what Frege—in reference to the epistemological disjunction between true and false propositions—called the level of *Gedanken* (Frege 1960, pp. 30ff; Eley 1969, pp. 81ff). It was thus impossible for early self-thematizations of society to achieve that "distance" on the basis of which sociology would later distinguish between the social reality of morals and the way moralists conceive morals (Durkheim 1933, p. 87). So far as academic disciplines and the history of ideas go, these barriers to reflection were expressed in the fact that the theory of society was understood as an integral part of "practical philosophy."

A conception of this kind cannot be put out of commission through its own internal logic. If our assumption is correct, if self-thematizations of society are made possible by the structure of society, occasioned by transformations in its evolutionary situation, and determined by the degree of differentiation and relative prominence of the distinct media of communication, then the impulse and occasion for a fundamental conceptual change can come only from society itself. This was in fact the case. It was the emergence of a money-oriented market society, new both in kind and size, which revolutionized the old social order in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. What is now labeled "bourgeois society" was in fact a system of a new type. Every social structure received a greater degree of "selectivity" and improbability, began to be perceived as one possible choice among others, and thus had to be redefined and determined anew.

The functional primacy of politics was replaced by a primacy of the economy.[18] The concept of *potestas* (the traditional linchpin of social theory) was replaced by the concept of "production." The kind of communication now given prominence was oriented toward money instead of power and authority. This by no means implied (and certainly it does not today) that the political system of society decreased in significance, size, or complexity. On the contrary, the function of politics, in the organized State, increased in importance, effectiveness, and the density of its routine supervision. At the same time, however, the economy became the leading subsystem of society, because it began to define the developmental stage at which society had arrived, and both progress and regression began to depend on it.[19] Political errors—even political catastrophes—remained possible and occurred on a regional basis; but they influenced the developmental stage of society only to the extent that they had economic consequences. As the economy achieved an improved capacity for recuperating, political crises began to resemble the occasional explosions of pressurized boilers, which indeed may blow up a few people, but do nothing to change societal relations.

After a money economy became dominant, the social whole could no longer be seriously comprehended as a "body" capable of acting in the same way as an individual. No one can claim to act as the plenipotentiary representative of the economy, even though entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial consortia occasionally try to appear in this guise. As a consequence, the economic system (to borrow a distinction from Parsons[20]), cannot be accurately conceptualized as a collectivity but only as a social system in the broader sense. Accordingly, after a temporary phase of symbiosis between profit maximization and morally choiceworthy behavior (a phase which eased the transition), the moral integration of economic life began to recede. Economic aspirations were no longer proscribed or shackled in order to satisfy conditions of mutual respect and esteem. Instead, economic success brought respect and esteem in its wake. Thereafter, pleonexy was considered neither virtuous nor unvirtuous. But its outcome became the basis for social prestige.

To the extent that society began to define itself primarily in economic terms (as is implied by the new concept of "bourgeois society"), this abstraction—with its attendant loss of society's capacity for action—became valid for society itself. One consequence was the disappearance of the abovementioned requirement that morality furnish the binding context for the relational structure of action. As a substitute context, a new concept of rationality was introduced. After the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had provided the necessary premises, there emerged a new concept of action based on the presocial[21] or "natural" freedom to satisfy needs. In sharp contrast to the economic thinking of earlier epochs, the rational was no longer conceived as the uncomplicated, exploitative maximization of outputs and returns, but rather as an establishment of relations between expenditure on the one hand, and output and returns on the other. These relations had to satisfy specific criteria such as the optimalization or maximization of profit.[22] The criterion of economic efficiency henceforth assumed the place of a "mean" previously occupied by the criterion of justice (Luhmann 1973a). It defined the principle for the self-reflection of bourgeois society, the principle which *all* the values and endeavors of this society must be in a position to convey: the principle underlying the establishment of relations between its various acts of establishing relations.

The advantages of this change were obvious. The new context of economic rationality gave the contingency of action a more abstract meaning, a higher degree of susceptibility to discretionary use, substitutibility and variability, as well as the possibility for strategically adapting to independently varying conditions. The chances released in this way were indispensible presuppositions for the technical and industrial development of modern society. The consequences for the self-thematization of this society were not quite so obvious. As long as "dominance" was conceived as political domination, it was difficult to attribute the dominant role in society to the economy. Politics (that is, the issuance of collectively binding decisions) remained necessary and still required a kind of moral "cover" or legitimation. The differentiation between politics and religion, as well as that between politics and economy, made it impossible for any one of these subsystems to represent the total social order.[23] This progressive differentiation resulted in an increase in the generality of all propositions referring to the system as a whole,[24] and consequently in an increased generality of eventual self-thematizations.

Under these conditions it became difficult to continue conceiving of society as "the social whole," and *a fortiori* to continue interpreting society on the basis of premises which had a moral significance for the esteem of others and oneself.[25] Later, during the nineteenth century, the idea of a social totality was replaced by the dichotomy between the (political) State and an (economic) society, understood as two facets of a national-*völkisch* life enclosed within common territorial borders. There was no concept, however, capable of articulating the unity underlying such a dichotomy—unless one accepted Hegel's solution based on a dual concept of the State. The unity of the social order as a whole was no longer discussed. It ceased to be conceived in its "selectivity," i.e., in what it excluded. The self-thematization of bourgeois society initially took the path of self-critique, because the new society was able to foresee its troublesome consequences before it had even understood itself. A self-hypostatization of bourgeois society (in the sense of a celebration of its own "perfection") was no longer possible. The burdens of self-definition and of self-foundation were unloaded onto two concepts which replaced perfection: "development" and "self-reflection."

Among countless, still controversial self-reflective attempts to conceptualize bourgeois society, that of Karl Marx has had the greatest impact. This influence is quite justified, since Marx's theory retained a concept of total society and was closely concerned with the historically pressing problem of an essentially economic society. Marx was able to take advantage of a transitional situation in which closeness to and remoteness from the self-realization of bourgeois society were combined in a unique and peculiarly fruitful way. In this situation, he was able to interpret bourgeois society both exhaustively and erroneously, that is, in *all* its fundamental dimensions from the viewpoint of a deceptively concrete optics associated with the *transition*. In the material dimension of social structure, the primacy of economy became for Marx the primacy of a metabolically founded system of needs. Therefore, the category of "production" became "the concept of the widest compass and a socially universal characteristic" (Morf 1970, p. 90) even though it obviously referred to a partial and one-sided phenomenon. In the social dimension, Marx interpreted the specifically "bourgeois" character of this society as an expression merely of the (now ostensibly dominating) class which set up this type of society and ensconced itself comfortably within it. As a first approximation, Marx located the distinctive trait of this class in its ownership of property. In the temporal dimension, Marx conceived evolution as a historical, dialectical, and lawlike process, where every previous achievement was both retained and surpassed in the subsequent phase—that is, where each antecedent development was negated as a specific configuration, but preserved in its special function.

For all three dimensions (material, social, and temporal), we must seriously rework the conceptual framework that Marx bequeathed to social theory. We can do this, as already suggested, under three rubrics: (1) system differentiation, (2) the media of communication, and (3) social evolution. Viewed against this backdrop, Marx's oversimplifications appear historically dated. They should now justly fall victim to *Aufhebung*. What we want to preserve is Marx's interpretation of society as a self-abstracting, self-categorizing, and self-thematizing social system—that is, his denial of any spirituality external to society (for instance, a transcendental consciousness) that explains and clarifies society to itself. To be repudiated, on the other hand, are various concrete aspects of Marx's theory which were due solely to the historical occasion and polemical confrontations—for example, its self-christening as "materialism" (which signaled a rejection of transcendental idealism, and which thus completely lost its significance when the later vanished from the scene), or the restriction of social critique to the criticism of private property (after property became nothing more than a guarantee for the abstract binary schematization of "owning/not owning" structurally required in every monetary code).

The all-inclusive nature of these situation-bound and overly concrete concepts had the ideological and political effect of splitting bourgeois society into "capitalist" and "socialist" camps. This formation of battlefronts, however, has not—neither in its elements nor as a relation—led to adequate reflection on the unity of society. It has even hindered a widespread recognition of the indisputable unity of our present world society. We might even view this as a historical accident, which perhaps offers our already constituted world society its last chance (under the mirage of a multiplicity of societal systems) to experiment with heterogeneous concepts—and that means, practically speaking, to approach the problem of economic and social planning from diverse starting points.

In recent years, moreover, new forms of self-reflection (at the level both of the economy and total society) have begun to emerge. In precise analogy to the liberal and constitutionalist endeavors of early bourgeois society, they culminate in a self-limitation of the economy with an eye on its direct and indirect social consequences. A brief allusion to the Club of Rome should suffice here. It is no longer simply assumed that the self-rationalization and self-optimalization of the economic system yields adequate or desirable results. The economic system—and this means not only entrepreneurs but also, for example, consumers—must learn to view itself as the environment of other social subsystems and also to be concerned about its impact on the total social environment. Hence, there arises a demand for broad *social* criteria according to which we can evaluate and adjudicate narrow *economic* criteria. Whether such self-reflective achievements are possible within the structure of our economic system or whether they will require a repoliticalization of this system (for example, new forms of nonmarket coordination between production and consumption) remains at present an open question.

To sum up: a reconsideration of the history of society's various self-thematizations not only helps to sort out good from bad ideas and to clarify true and untrue statements about society. More importantly, it employs the intellectual technique of "relation-building"—the same technique it ascribes to society. It investigates the relations of society with itself as a system-in-an-environment. The assumption built into this formulation of the question is this: between contingent, evolutionarily variable social structures and contingent, evolutionarily variable self-definitions of society, noncontingent relations can be ascertained.[26]

A backward glance of this sort, therefore, is already secretly guided by a transformation in the standards governing what is theoretically defensible. It was just such a shift that first made possible this retrospective thematization of thematizations. The self-thematizations contained in traditional European and bourgeois-socialist reflection on society have already become obsolete and may be treated in such a fashion as soon as they are unburdened of their self-reflective function. For this purpose we need a substitute theory, an up-to-date self-thematization of society which appropriates the following Marxist postulate and turns it against Marx: we must always analyze society by employing the most advanced concepts and theories available at the time.

This intention makes it inescapable (because possible) for us to thematize the historical transformation of self-thematizations. Social theory must attend to this possibility, that is, to the variability of society's self-thematizations. We must reflect on the contingency of self-reflection and therefore on the history of previous social theory. For this very reason we can today no longer begin naïvely with the function and structure of whatever happens to be the dominant subsystem. We cannot argue, like Aristotle or Marx, in a *pars pro toto* fashion. We cannot claim that man *qua* man is "naturally" an ethical-political or a material-economic animal, who as such gravitates historically toward "perfection" or "development." Instead, social theory must deploy a more abstract conceptual instrumentarium by means of which we can discern the relational and contingent character of such "natural" definitions of man.

In the first section we saw that the self-reflection of a system can assume the form of a hypostatization. The relation between the system and this hypostatization necessarily remains obscure. We saw in the second section that until now all self-thematizations of society have always fallen into synecdoche, have always taken a single subsystem for the whole, and therefore have necessarily left unclarified the relation between whole and parts. We presume that these two results are interconnected, with the consequence that in each case a part is necessarily hypostatized as the whole.[27] This synecdochic form of a system's self-reflection has been rendered obsolete by the transformation of society. Today's world society can only manage to reflect on itself by combining more highly abstract means of thought, which in turn permit an ancillary thematization of the historicity and contingency of each previous self-thematization. This culminates in self-reflection's becoming reflexive. Self-thematizations thereby become conscious of themselves as processes that occur within systems. This requires, as we want to show in the following section, (1) a greater degree of consciousness about the social genesis of meaning, and in connection with this, (2) the accessibility and usefulness of the insight that all meaning-formation is inherently contingent, that it refers to other possibilities above and beyond itself,[28] and (3) the functionalization of self-reflection with regard to the difference between a system and its environment. The reference system for this discussion can neither be the individual (a subject) nor a system of knowledge (science), but only society itself.

III

"Society" can be defined as the widest and most all-embracing system of communicative relations among mutually accessible human actions and experiences (Luhmann, 1970a; 1971c). The genesis of meaning depends upon communication between human beings. The *broadest and most comprehensive* social system is therefore the one which must be presupposed in *every* communication and in *every* experience or action insofar as "meaning" plays an essential role. Max Adler (1936) referred to society as a "social a priori." We shall replace this formula (which echoes Kant's theory of knowledge) with the concept of meaning-generating social systems.

"Meaning" may be defined as the conjunction of a horizon of possibilities with selection or choice. "Meaning" in this sense makes especially effective forms of selectivity available to systems. This includes the comprehension of choice *as* choice. With the help of meaning, selections can be submitted to supervision, control, and correction, because the array of options from which the selection was made is retained and remains visible *in* the selection. In other words, meaning "modalizes" the selective processes of experience and action in such a way that their selectivity can be understood, managed, and readjusted. This *special character* of meaning can be described in a naïve phenomenological manner, and verified in the analysis of intentionality. That is not true, however, of the *genesis* of meaning.[29] To the constitution of a consciousness of selectivity belongs double selectivity or communication in which one individual can "read off" his options and the selectivity of his own behavior from the behavior of another and thereby learn to meaningfully structure his own behavior.[30] Communication, however, requires that (with the help of structured expectations) boundaries of expectable behavior can be drawn. That is, it requires an interruption of continuity in the spectrum of the possible: system formation. A minimal requirement for the genesis of meaning is a plurality of uncoordinated physical and organic centers of choice and a reduction of what is possible for them through a system that marks off mutually expected behavior from other possible events. A meaning-generating system is always concurrently a system which has meaning in itself and which is accessible to itself as a system which uses meaning.[31] It defines expectations as well as boundaries through meaning. On this basis, it constitutes the difference between inner and outer as a difference between heterogeneous horizons for further thematization.[32] This differentiation is the fundamental precondition for the possibility of self-thematization based on meaning.

The unity of meaning-generation and meaning-use can be seen in that, along with the capacity for selectivity and awareness of choice on the basis of meaning, an evolutionary level is reached behind which a system possessing that capacity can no longer lapse.[33] There exist for such systems no footholds or reference points outside their meaningfully constituted world. For these systems, reality itself is meaning. So long as its physical and organic premises continue to exist, socially generated meaning is an irreversible evolutionary achievement.

Linked to this achievement is the predisposition of meaning-oriented processes to become reflexive.[34] This is only another formulation for what we have just called the unity of meaning-generation and meaning-use. In turn, this reflexivity is a phenomenologically verifiable fact, from which the social sciences can abstract only at the cost of renouncing their reference to the life world. It is given along with the referential structure of meaning. This referential structure, and the feedback loop (or self-connectedness) of all meaning-oriented processes contained therein, cannot be eliminated. They can only be used and rationalized through that technique of establishing relations from which our considerations began. Self-reflection is one example of this technique in action. As the self-thematization of meaning-generating systems, it is the most thoroughgoing and consistent expression of their potential for rationality. The self-thematization of society is therefore the form of rationality corresponding to social evolution. Our analysis of the history of society's self-reflection corroborates this.

A precise analysis of the achievement of meaning and its potential for rationality must therefore refer to the societal system, and must try to explain how the level of confrontation between system and environment is modified through this achievement. We can describe this change with the help of the concepts "generalization" and "modalization" as well as with the help of a distinction between several dimensions of meaning. Taken together, these concepts define the context within which the relation of self-thematization becomes historically possible and open to interpretation.

"Generalization" refers to the fact that meaning can be retained as compatible with a plurality of heterogeneous states of the system and its environment. "Modalization" means that, with the help of such generalizations, the interaction of various systems can be regulated because a level of generalized preunderstandings is presupposed as a condition for communicative understanding.[35] Modalization can function as a mere thematic horizon—tacit, inarticulated, a matter of mood or atmosphere lying on the periphery of consciousness—and this is normal for the world (Watzlawick 1967). For example, a society normally needs no unambiguous concept of time, but manages quite well with very vague, self-contradictory notions for everyday guidance.[36] Nevertheless, under special circumstances, modalization can also be thematized and rendered problematic. That is, it can be exposed to the possibility of negation. A thematization of modalities, however, makes heavy demands on the self-thematizations of the participating system. As a possibility, therefore, it depends on society's stage of development.

Through these achievements of horizon-formation, generalization, and modalization, the genesis of meaning furnishes the precondition for the fact that the relationship between a system and its environment is explicitly conceived as a "relation" and is accessible and utilizable as such. The relation to the environment thereby becomes, in sharply abridged form, the topic of the system's self-understanding. Within a system, one can reflect on it, talk about it, and make decisions concerning it. The context for establishing such a relation between system and environment can only be furnished by our image of the world which spans the relation and includes both system and environment. Thus, there emerges a distinction for the system (in a way that would have been impossible without the genesis of meaning) between the *environment* which it sees confronting it, and the *world* to which it belongs. This bifurcation is *simultaneously* a condition for the possibility of self-thematization, and a condition for the symbolic generalization and modalization of system/environment processes. Therefore, we assume that self-thematizations vary along with the forms in which system/environment relations are conceptualized and elaborated.[37]

In its reference to the world, all meaning has three necessary dimensions which taken together bridge the difference between system and environment. They can be said to articulate the world common to both systems and environments (Luhmann 1971d, pp. 48ff). Meaning refers, in the material dimension, to other possibilities; in the temporal dimension, it constitutes the double horizon of past and future; and in the social dimension, it presupposes a plurality of selecting systems which jointly (consenting or dissent-ing) thematize meaning. Between these three dimensions there exist interdependencies in respect both to the genesis and the generalization of meaning. A greater degree of abstraction in concepts and images of time, for example, has both presuppositions in and consequences for the interpretation of social relations.

This cannot now be explicated more precisely. Important for our topic of the self-thematization of society, however, is the way these three dimensions function as the context for a system's establishing relations to itself and to its environment. We assume that it is essential for all self-thematizations to articulate themselves in these three dimensions—which does not exclude the possibility that the center of gravity may be shifted or that the articulation of one dimension may guide another. The meaningful self-identity of the system, to which processes in the system can relate themselves, necessarily has a material, a temporal, and a social contingency and susceptibility to negation. In reviewing Marx's theory, we asserted that he interpreted the social reference of these three dimensions (as a system of needs, as dialectical development, and as class domination) in what has now become a historically otiose and inadequate manner. The task remains to replace Marx's interpretations with more abstract sociological concepts.

Materially, the identity of society articulates itself through the schema of *system differentiation*, roughly, through the distribution and diffusion of segmentary and functional forms of differentiation. According to whether the primary differentiation of society is institutionalized as segmentary or as functional (i.e., according to whether it rests on the principle of equality or of inequality), distinct self-thematizations become plausible. Segmentary societies can, without much difficulty, construe the social whole as a larger form of the basic subsystem, for instance, as a large family or as "the country," all settlements taken together. Similarly, they project their social order in a subsequent enlargement onto the world: the "social" cosmos. As functional differentiation progresses, this form of self-thematization breaks down, until finally today the unity of society cannot be defined materially at all because it includes everything that in any way connects men with one another. The perspectives coordinated with each subsystem become highly autonomous and therefore incapable of representing society as a whole. As a result, the attempt to attribute societal primacy to a single component system of society (first to politics, then to economy) and thereby to assign it the task of representing the whole, can today no longer be made fully convincing.

In these circumstances, we find on the level of subsystems or even of simple organizations or interaction systems almost no articulate reference to the overarching society. Social differentiation is not taken into account through thematically concentrated self-reflection, but tacitly through restrictions on the structural compatibility of subsystems. In spite of this, we can conceive of ways of overcoming this deficit in self-reflection even in the context of strongly marked functional differentiation. This is true, above all, when functionally distinct subsystems learn both to understand and to restrict themselves as adequate environments of other systems. Their identity is thereby oriented and varied on the basis of the nonidentity of *two* pictures: their specific function and their role as the social environment of other subsystems.[38] To the extent that this occurs, social differentiation is reflected in the structure and process of subsystems.

In the temporal dimension, the identity of society is thematized with a view to *evolution*. Political societies have already founded this self-understanding on an awareness of their advanced historical situation. They celebrated this achievement and interpreted it as a possibility and as a burden.[39] For the self-understanding of modern bourgeois society, universal historical consciousness (in theories of social evolution) is self-evident.[40] The decisive alternative (which can be compared with the alternative between segmentary and functional differentiation, but which only became explicit later on) lies in the question as to whether society is thematized primarily in regard to its *past* or primarily in regard to its *future*. With the transition to bourgeois society, a "change of command" among temporal horizons appears to emerge in the sense that the future rather than the past now serves as the referential horizon for self-thematizations.[41] Accordingly, the structural demand for decision-making is transferred from memory to prognosis. This inversion or rearrangement may initially have had something to do with the transfer of functional primacy from politics to the economy, for politics (owing to its need for legitimation and consensus) tends to depend for orientation on articulated history, while the economy (owing to its need for calculation) tends to depend on an articulable future. With the consolidation of a single world society, this transformation is stabilized for two reasons: the various distinct histories of regional societies must either be cast off or fused into a possibly shareable future, and the time of accidental evolution and experimentation with a plurality of societies has come to an end. The further evolution of one single world society—following its own self-understanding—cannot simply result from the past nor can it be left to chance. Thus, society must open itself temporally towards the future. This demands a reorientation of self-thematization toward contingency, that is, toward the possibility of also being able to be otherwise.

Since the nineteenth century, system differentiation and evolution have belonged to the stock contents of sociology (even if they have often been disputed and sometimes even discredited). In these respects, as a result, the present self-thematization of society can build upon a certain amount of preparatory professional work. For the *social* dimension, however, we lack a concept of comparable range and significance. Only recently has there been an attempt to fill this gap with a theory of *the generalized media of communication.*[42]

This theory refers specifically to the fundamental problem of the social dimension. It presupposes a plurality of autonomous centers of selection or choice (personal or social systems) and poses the question of how, under changing sociostructural conditions, selections can nonetheless be communicated. It deals with the chances and risks of a noncoordination of selective achievements: chances for an increase and enhancement of selectivity through chain-formations and risks of a breakdown or mutual interference of processes. Important examples of such media are truth, love, money, and power. The transfer of reduced complexity is guaranteed through symbolically generalized communication codes which fix the conditions under which the selections of one person or social system motivate acceptance on the part of another. In the course of social evolution, the media mentioned emerge as discrete and separate codes for particular selections and become the foundation for the subsequent emergence of the most important subsystems.

On this basis, the degree of interdependence between chances and risks is increased simultaneously with the complexity of processes which can be achieved in society.

All this can only be mentioned in passing, and can be worked out neither generally nor for a single medium. Important for our topic of the self-reflection of society is the fact that the means for symbolically presenting the identity and selectivity of society are taken from the media codes or at least must be compatible with them. To the extent that overarching religious interpretations of the contingency of society are eroded while simultaneously media codes are differentiated and specialized, self-reflection on the unity of society loses its capacity to "present" itself in a convincing way. The unity of society can no longer be represented through powerful political domination; nor can it be measured in money, for instance in terms of an increase in the Gross National Product. Even the capacity for truth of propositions about society as a whole can be thrown into doubt when measured against the usual methodological standards. Nonetheless, society is there, evident in its facticity and its selectivity. The fact that none of the specialized media are sufficient for thematizing the *unity* of society stems perhaps from the fact that, for the acceptance of this unity, no longer are any justifications or motives required.

There are special reasons for this, and they lie in the functional mode and the structure of society. Society is a self-substituting order. It can be replaced only by itself; it can only develop further. For this reason, the double conception of bourgeois society as capitalist or socialist (bifurcated by self-critique) no longer attains the status of a social theory when it limits itself to setting up a blanket contrast between total pictures of society. World society can no longer be identified by establishing the correct principle of its perfection (for instance, "justice"), but only by determining the conditions of and the restrictions on its development. Development always takes place as a series of piecemeal changes. For this reason alone, communication media and motives are necessary. The symbolic codes of single media—even truth!—achieve no representative expression of the unity, truth, and goodness of society. Rather they are partial perspectives for reflection in which the function of each medium can be related to the condition and development of society. Reflection, therefore, produces special relations between the single symbolically generalized media and society. Through such relation-building, society is thematized and simultaneously reinterpreted as contingent. The self-reflection of society takes the form of special perspectives directed from the angle of vision of single media codes and media systems and directed toward society as a whole. In the concluding section (V) we shall pursue this possibility with regard to the particular conditions of scientific reflection (i.e., reflection capable of "truth") without denying or slighting the possibilities of artistic, political, economic, or religious reflection.

IV

Horizons containing further accessible possibilities for both action and experience are constituted together with meaning. The world is the horizon of such horizons. These two theses of Husserl (1948, 26ff) are centrally dependent on the metaphor of "horizon." This metaphor has a degree of everyday plausibility. Nevertheless it is not clear what justifies our assuming the *unity* of a horizon or the world when its inner structure is variable.[43] Precisely this question, however, can become significant for the problem of self-reflection, especially when doubt is cast upon the sufficiency of "the subject" as a guarantee for the unity of the world.

For earlier societies, the world or cosmos did not assume the form of a horizon. Originally the world was imaginable, if at all, only as a society writ large, as the overarching and all-inclusive social order. Only the gradual desocialization of nature[44] or the gradual emergence of a specifically social system of society brought with it a more highly generalized concept of the world, which included both nature and human relations despite their dissimilarity. Accompanying the transition from primitive societies to high cultures was the emergence of a differentiation between the environment and the world, between adaptation and influence on the one hand, and self-reflection on the other. Corresponding to the *political* self-thematization of high cultures was an *aggregate concept* of the world: the world was abstractly interpreted as an *uni-*

versitas rerum, as the totality of things. This had special consequences. The same logical problems relating to the difference between a whole and its parts which occupied us on the level of the social system were repeated in the aggregate concept of the world. They could be "solved" (here as there) through domination.[45] Moreover, the very meaning of "the totality of things" posed compellingly the question about the outer boundaries of the world and about overstepping these boundaries. The order (and, even more emphatically, the perfection) of a totality of things was only imaginable or conceivable within boundaries that excluded randomness. The unity of the world was not conceived as the mere togetherness of a heap, but rather as an order, in the Middle Ages predominantly as *centrality*. Man found himself at the center of the world (which was not necessarily a good place to be). Time was conceived in connection with processes which, in turn, were thought to be analogous to actions. In sharp contrast to modern evolutionary theory, such a concept of time *excluded* arbitrariness of the beginning, arbitrariness of the end, and indifference toward content. Therefore, a plurality of worlds was also imaginable and was often insinuated as a reality or at least as a possibility, even though the concept of the world made it impossible to thematize the world of worlds (Blumenberg 1962, pp. 43ff). The totality of (real or possible) worlds is not itself a world. Between worlds, as a result, no relations can subsist—except perhaps in the form of a common dependency on God. One may perceive a weak echo here of contemporaneous experience with a plurality of societies, a plurality which had its foundation and its plausibility in the plurality of political authorities. Each society thematized itself politically as one among many, as a separate part of the world.

All this changed—and sociologically this will not be seen as an accident—with the transition to bourgeois society. The plurality of possible or even real worlds became the unity of the world of the possible (Pape 1965). This change in orientation was initially mirrored, so far as conceptual techniques are concerned, in the theory of modalities. One no longer spoke only about possible, contingent, necessary, future, past (events)—merely abstracting these genera—but also about *the* possible, *the* future, and so forth, thus bringing into view another level in the modalization of being, precisely the one which Husserl later named "horizon." Thereafter, one could investigate not only the origin and characteristics of the possible, but also conditions of possibility *qua* modality in general—initially, with Kant, as forms of knowledge.[46] Previously, the real had been the perfect order selected out of the possible through the Creation. Now, by contrast, the projection of possibilities helped orient the selection of desired realities. In this function, the world of the possible was geared to capacities for knowledge and selection. The world thus became the horizon accompanying every movement, every boundary crossing, and every innovation. In other words, an *aggregate concept* of the world was replaced by a *correlate concept* of the world. These "merely" conceptual shifts accompanied and contributed to transformations in society's own demand for self-reflection. We need not track down the specific contemporary interconnections in each case, since we are not concerned with historical research into causes and motives. The interconnectedness of results is obvious. Through the "emancipation" of the economic system and its consequences, society was fundamentally changed. It became much more heterogeneous and complex than ever before. Indeed, society is almost no longer definable in its unity and (despite the nineteenth century with its inadequate concept of "nation" and its futile politics of imperialism) can no longer integrate its subsystems through shared territorial borders. From this point on, society was only possible as world society. The pronounced functional differentiation of society, the diversity of its special perspectives, as well as the remaining distinctions between regional cultures compelled a *possibilization* of the world. Points of agreement lay increasingly in premises about the possible. We now agree only about the future—above all, about desirable directions for growth—and we can no longer reach consensus about the preexistent or the currently valid. For world society, there can now be only a single world, and one that can no longer be adequately grasped as an *universitas rerum*, but rather must also include everything possible. The world, in other words, is precisely the horizon of possibilities that underlies the preexistent and the currently valid. World society constitutes a world with an open future.[47] Whatever is possible or will become possible has this one system reference and this one horizon. Every act of stepping over meaningfully constituted boundaries takes place within this system and is accompanied by a corresponding expansion of the world. It is this system (and not, say, the consciousness of "the subject") which realizes the immanence of the transcendent. World society as a system, like the world as a horizon, seems to be a compulsory unity that cannot be negated, while at the same time it escapes definition through boundaries of what is possible.

This condition of society is registered in all social sectors as a deficit of self-reflection—most obviously (because here again it is, as a deficit, an object of reflection) in art. But perhaps it only gives birth to a novel style of reflection: self-thematization. After the constitution of a world society, reflection can no longer motivate itself on the basis of oppositions or resistances—neither on the basis of resistances in the environment of society (which are only occasions for influence or adaptation) nor of resistances on the boundaries of what is possible in the world. It must make itself possible and find the condition for its possibilities in the systems whose unity and contingency it reflects at any given time.

Reality is always given as situated factually, historically, positively, evolutionarily—and also as otherwise possible. The condition for other possibilities lies in the self-abstraction of real systems. Reflection is a moment or aspect of this self-abstraction. A concept of the world adequate to this fact comprehends and integrates not only things but also horizons. The world, however, is not just the most inclusive horizon containing arbitrary content, or the most remote boundary line which recedes at each step toward it. The world instead is the "total horizon," the overlapping of all horizons,[48] the referential structure of daily life which is accessible in every single topic and can be reached through self-thematization. It is a centralized order, but one in which every element is a center. It is simultaneously concrete and infinite.

V

This analysis forces us to repose an old question: under what conditions can reflection be true? We must ask it generally and urgently with an eye to society's own self-reflection. Whenever *truth* itself becomes an object of reflection, whenever assertions are made about it, we are faced with a version of the famous paradox of the "Cretan liar": the asserter loses his impartiality and the assertion loses its independence from its object.[49] This mix-up endangers the cognitive technique of "relating." It threatens to undermine the possibility for assertions and objects to vary independently of one another.[50] There do not seem to be any "solutions" that might induce this problem to disappear, so that it would no longer arise as a problem, but only (if at all) as an error. There are, however, a series of proposals for handling the problem, each of which drags in its train a series of further problems. Hermeneutics does not endeavor "to get out of the circle—but to find the correct path within the circle" (Heidegger 1949, p. 153). Following Tarski, logic proposes a distinction between diverse "levels" of assertion, so that the problem then consists in finding the correct way of going from one level to another (Stegmüller 1957). These attempts share a common starting point: the definition of reflection as a process of thinking or knowing. As soon as social theory alters this starting point, however, as soon as it begins with the process of self-thematization (not *already specialized* in thinking or knowing!), it must also attempt to reconstruct the problem *ab initio.*

In the ordinary formulation of this old problem, if we ignore the exclusive reference to processes of thinking, we can discern striking parallels to other media of social communication. As a consequence, it will be helpful to consider an analog in the area of "power." Here too the emergence of power in the imposing form of "the sovereign State" meant that the normative code of political power was reinterpreted as contingent and thus subjected to having power exerted upon it. Since then, legal constraints on the exercise of power can be circumvented by means of power not only *de facto*, but also according to the prevailing norms. It followed that the power code, as a self-limitation of political power, had to be newly legitimated and elaborated in the form of the constitutional *Rechtsstaat*, based on looser and more abstract conditions for social compatibility.[51] At any rate, this was successfully achieved in various territorial states. Therefore, it may have been logically bizarre but it was certainly not socially impossible.[52]

Discussions about truth within science encounter the same problem. In modern society, at any rate, truth cannot be conceived as a simple "resemblance" of thinking to its object. And it also cannot be conceived strictly as the obverse, as an assimilation of the object to thinking. Both norms (*adaequatio intellectus ad rem* and *adaequatio rei ad intellectum*) remain concepts that construe experience as a relation between thinking and its object—that is, as relation-building of the first stage.[53] Within such a relation of "adequation," truth can either be ascribed externally to the object or internally to thinking. In either case, truth remains a characteristic or property of some *thing*. Only recently did it become possible to question the very meaning of "sameness," *adaequatio*, "correspondence," *convenientia*, and "correctness." When these old clichés recommending pious fidelity are thrown into question, truth itself (like political power) can be treated as a looser or more contingent relation. Science gains more room for experiment and maneuver. Trying out new ideas, rearranging one's material on a mere hunch, making bold conjectures—all this becomes quite routine. These new freedoms, of course, must still be regulated. The question is: how?

An answer is not readily forthcoming, and (because of the poverty of our experience with the relevant concepts) is not to be expected. The question itself, however, can be made more precise. After our retrospective glance at the history of the previous self-thematizations of European society, it is tempting to seek the solution to our problems once again in the hypostatization of a part for the whole. The only change would be a shift in social primacy. Truth would take the place of power and money, and science would take the place of politics and the economy. We could prognosticate that the society of the future would be a *societas scientifica*. Science could pragmatically evade what were once unavoidable difficulties with the help of structures and processes which, although logically odd, are possible socially, compatible with other requirements of society, favorable to evolution, and institutionalized in a functionally adequate way in the scientific system.[54]

If science ever assumes social primacy, the self-thematization of society will acquire a new center of gravity and be beset by new problems. There would be a "change of command" in the key problems by means of which society identifies itself as being thus-

and-so-and-possibly-otherwise. In *political* society, the defining moment was the reconstruction of social contingency, through the alternative of justice and injustice and the attendant binary schematization of physical force as either for or against law and the state. In *economic* society, there was superimposed upon this the reconstruction of social contingency through scarcity in the monetary code and its binary schematization through property. This made possible a universal and unambiguous ascription of owning and not owning and, thus, exchange, and as a further result, a general separation between production and consumption. In both cases the main achievement of social evolution lay in the stress on a new *binary* scheme. It became futile to expect one half of either dichotomy to suppress its counterpart. There was ultimately no hope, to paraphrase Sorel (1936, p. 256f.), of definitively overthrowing all authority by means of violence. There was likewise no chance that a rebellion of the unpropertied classes against property owners could result in the utter abolition of the *difference* between owning and not owning. Indeed, there is only one form of "cancellation" or *Aufhebung* possible. This would involve another schematism (for example, the true/false schema of logic) taking over social primacy. It would preserve the alternatives of illegal/legal behavior and of ownership/nonownership, but it would reform them and release them from their previous burdens. Problems stemming from the contingency of human behavior (the elemental problem of society) would still plague the central binary schematization, in this case the assumption that there exists a perfectly clear-cut (mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive) disjunction between truth and untruth. The logic of interaction between partners, *both* of whom can say "no," remains open-ended even when interaction produces and presupposes shifts in social primacy that cannot be negated. This leads us to a new understanding of the old question about the conditions for the possibility of truth in the social sciences. Among other things, we confront here once more the problem of predicting those future actions which will depend upon scientific truths that have not yet been discovered (Popper 1963, pp. 293ff.).

Self-thematizations of society do not depend on the solution to foundational problems such as these. Asserting this would amount to a self-hypostatization of the scientific system. It would be the pretension of subordinating society as a whole to the strict standards of scientific truth. This is tempting because of a philosophical tradition that linked the concept of reflection to the process of knowing the truth—as if the primary (if not the sole) goal of reflection were to demolish errors and ascertain truths. Science, however, should be able to free itself from such a self-hypostatization, especially since it possesses another tradition concerned with the limits of human reason.

The scientific system, in fact, must contribute to the self-thematization of society not by hypostatizing truth but by reflecting on its own contingent identity in a socially "domesticated" environment, and one which (through evolution) has become dense with presuppositions. This way of formulating the task implies a translation of older conceptions of the problem (those which began with human finitude, the limits of reason and its instruments and the conditions for the possibility of knowledge) into the language of systems theory. At the level of a theory of society,[55] the following suggestions can be drawn from our preceding analyses.

The differentiation of society into functionally specialized subsystems requires that social science distinguish various system references—and not only in its objective field of inquiry but also when it reflects on itself. The apparatus and knowledge of science are not necessarily the apparatus and knowledge of society. Scientific truths and falsehoods are not necessarily identical with the everyday truths and falsehoods of the rest of society. From the standpoint of the scientific system, this difference has usually been described as a problem of "application." But that is a parochially system-relative and incomplete way of looking at the matter. It is crucial to note that risks accompanying the scientific production of truth cannot necessarily be borne. The chances exploited by science may well be hazards that are in no way socially useful.[56] What is presumably even more dangerous is the fact that science not only produces truths but also falsehoods. It discredits socially accepted truths regardless of whether they are still needed or not. Finally, the collaboration between science and the rest of society seems, at first, to take the form of defining priorities among subjects of research (e.g., Weingart 1970), not the form of a slackening of scientific standards. Therefore, it remains compatible with scientific progress (even if incompatible with scientifically *managed* progress). All this necessitates a revision of the concept of truth, to which we shall return below.

Following a general theorem of systems theory, we can assume that functional differentiation increases the complexity of a system (and of its determinate environment). This involves the formation of subsystems within the overarching system. Such subsystems produce and reduce more complex possibilities for selection within the total system. This is archetypically true for the relation between science and society. The function of the scientific system cannot be adequately described as the accumulation of knowledge. That may be the intention of research.[57] But the emergence of a discrete social system for science widens the knowledge *possibilities* (the "selection horizon" of knowing) in such a way that it permits more truths and more falsehoods to be ascertained or corroborated. There is thus an increase in the number *and the selectivity* of scientific assertions believable as true or false. *And this exerts special influence on society's self-thematization.* In fact, this change means that self-thematizations of society are no longer *eo ipso* capable of being labeled true or false. Instead, truth becomes a socially legitimated *sub*perspective. It represents only a separate subsystem of society's self-thematization.

Differentiation gives subsystems the chance to understand themselves as the environments of other systems, and to identify themselves in the expectations of these other systems. Similarly, evolution provides the possibility for a historical consciousness. Communication media too have their history—a history of being demarcated, symbolically generalized, and functionally specified (Luhmann 1976). This does not exclude the possibility of formulating evolutionary theories with claims to truth. However, it does demand that these theories thematize themselves as part of the history of society's own process of self-reflection. They can and must measure themselves according to the same criteria of truth which (as evolutionary achievements) they have furnished.

Subsystem relativization, like historical relativization, brings into difficulty a theory of truth which conceives truth quasi-ontologically, as the "property" of an object or a proposition. An alternative is to understand truth as a symbolically generalized communication medium, which operates under changing social conditions. Communication media are symbolically generalized codes for the transmission of selections. Truth is a medium for conveying experienced selections, whose selectivity is attributed to the world.[58] It rests on (1) a differentiation between structure and process (code and communication) and (2) the combination of diversely situated selective perspectives (alter and ego) in the communication process.

We began with the question of the extent to which the self-reflection of society can be true or false. We cannot return to this question now. It has been shown that the question was posed in too global and nondiscriminating a way. Scientific truth (in contrast to the modest truths that function in the everyday life world) is a category that first becomes possible through the emergence of a discrete scientific system. It presupposes strict impartiality toward the distinction between truth and untruth. That is to say, it permits no extrascientific commitment to the truth of specific hypotheses. Scientific truth belongs in the context of the self-thematization of the scientific system and its *special* perspective on the unity of society. The perspective of science can only be identified with the perspective of total society through a hypostatization of the part for the whole. Such hypostatizing becomes impossible, however, precisely with regard to truth, if the scientific system comprehends its own contingent identity as a *sub*system of society.

The sort of self-reflection that helps demolish self-hypostatizations (through the self-thematization of the scientific system) is not rigidly bound to the nominalist form of recognizing the limits of reason and its instruments. Another possibility lies implicit in Husserl's concept of the "life world." This takes the form of a counterconcept: science (as *mere* science) is overshadowed by the socially constituted world. Thus, it can finally recognize itself as a one-sided perspective.[59] For Husserl, the self-hypostatization of science expresses the unreflective naiveté of a universal "objectivism" that has forgotten its "ground" and thus the conditions for its own possibility—the intersubjectively constituted life world. Of course, it remains to ask if the Husserlian category of "life" can offer a sufficient basis for countervailing (and dehypostatizing) self-thematizations of the scientific system, and if it does not proceed too hastily in granting concrete humanity to the concept of the world.[60] At present, one cannot help noticing that every connection between life world philosophy and the theory of science has broken down.[61] I suspect that a theory of society couched in terms of systems theory will produce better results.

The feared circle of truth about truth can then assume the form of an analysis which seeks to clarify the societal compatibility, evolutionary situation and system-internal coordinability of complex problem-solutions of the truth medium. Whether science eventually attains the "primacy" among subsystems of society is to be decided not on this level but by subsequent achievements of research. What reflection *will* decide, however, is whether such a primacy must take the form of just another self-hypostatization, or if it will be based on the fact that science can survey, comprehend, and control more complexity than any other subsystem of society.

Notes

Translators' Introduction

1. As has been frequently pointed out, Luhmann does not view massive and long-term social transformations as particularly suitable candidates for moral approval or disapproval (Poggi 1979, p. xii). Nevertheless, a desire to ridicule the distaste for modern society vaunted by many of his contemporaries and countrymen leads him to place special emphasis on the undeniable human gains that have accompanied modernization. He also follows Weber, however, in the anti-Romantic conviction that every solution to a problem generates new unsolved problems (*Folgeprobleme*). Similarly, he subscribes to the Law of Conservation of Trouble: gains are always accompanied by losses, and the gains of modernization are no exception.

2. Other basic characteristics which Luhmann attributes to modern society are secularization, abstraction, an emphasis on the future at the expense of the past, a new stress on individuality, and a higher tolerance for deviance and conflict—that is, a notable loosening in the conditions for social compatibility. For the sake of synopsis, it may be helpful to assemble here a more detailed list of the main forms of differentiation (all characterizing the modernization of Europe) discussed or mentioned in this volume: (1) the privatization of religion, (2) the rise of territorial nation-states, with increasingly bureaucratic administrations and the open declaration of *raison d'état* as a political maxim, (3) the separation of property ownership from ecclesiastical, military, and political responsibilities, and the eventual emergence of rational capitalism based on the social acceptability of individual profit-seeking, (4) the approval of "curiosity" as a legitimate motive for the pursuit of knowledge; and the specialization of science on the basis of rigorous quantitative-hypothetical-experimental techniques, (5) the release of art from civic and religious functions, (6) the imposition of constitutional limitations on the exercise of political power; and ultimately the "inclusion" of the entire adult population in electoral procedures, (7) a displacement in the grounds for marriage from religious, economic, and other institutional considerations to romantic or passionate love and personal choice; and the shrinkage of the basic kinship unit to the small and increasingly one-generational nuclear family, (8) the birth of universal and compulsory public schooling, and (9) the positivization of law or the shift in the basis of legality from immutable "natural law" to formal procedures for changing legal codes in an orderly way. With all due caveats, this vast, sprawling, and historically staggered development can be usefully summarized in Luhmann's concept of "functional differentiation."

3. Needless to say, Luhmann is aware that this tidy label imposes a far greater sense of unity and logical coherence on the relevant literature than it in fact possesses.

4. "To characterize the State as 'the self-organization of society' is not

only false empirically; it is equally mistaken as an assumption about latent tendencies. And another reason to reject such a definition is that it led Carl Schmitt to embrace 'the total state'" (Luhmann 1965, 14). To underline how wrongheaded and irresponsible it was for Habermas (1975, p. 93) to associate Luhmann with Carl Schmitt, it might be worth reporting Luhmann's hilarious retort to Schmitt's claim that "the sovereign is he who decides in the exceptional situation" (1934, p. 11). Luhmann defines the sovereign quite simply as "he who never allows himself to be maneuvered into the exceptional situation" (oral communication). For the general thesis that "power rests on avoiding the exceptional case," see Luhmann (1979, p. 121).

5. When considering the importance Luhmann attributes to formal organizations, the reader should recall the appalled reaction to bureaucratic rationality and "the administered world" repeatedly expressed by romantic German conservatives and neo-Marxists. Put crudely, their idea is that bureaucracy represents an ugly caricature of community and another pathological expression of the division of labor. That is to say, it signals a final breakdown of communal oneness and emotional-moral brotherhood.

1. Durkheim on Morality and the Division of Labor

1. A minor detail: Durkheim only cites Simmel's work on social differentiation (without mentioning its original publication date of 1890) in a note added to the second edition of *The Division of Labor in Society* (1933, p. 46n). (All in-text references are to this edition.)

2. In the thirties, Merton spoke of the "belated English translation" of Durkheim's book (1934, p. 319).

3. This is the achievement of biographical and critical works such as Lukes 1973. Within this context, incidentally, Nibset believes that *De la division du travail social* is "in a sense an unsuccessful book" (Nisbet 1974, p. 30): the thesis is not proven, nor did Durkheim himself ever return to his distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity. We might ask, however, how many scientific classics could survive a rigorous application of these standards.

4. "History is the realm of continuity, not of consistency," says Vartanian, referring specifically to the history of theories (1953, p.9).

5. Cf. Eisenstadt and Curelaru 1976, esp. pp. 55ff. According to Eisenstadt we arrived at our specific sociological tradition through a switch in problem constellation. Our problem is no longer how did social order arise and how is it to be explained, but rather: how is it possible? *That* is the traditional problem which present-day theoretical research takes up. This problem, of course, is central to Durkheim's polemic against contractarian social theory (pp. 200ff.)

6. In the context of Parsonian theory, we must say: all social theories that slight the differentiation between the personality system and the organism.

7. This is true even though in China Durkheim could have found examples of criminals who were organized into guilds and recognized as legitimate partners in bargaining.

8. This concept is difficult and open to diverse interpretations. It has also been heavily criticized. Nevertheless, it may still be made convincing if we hold onto the point that everyone can distinguish (within himself) between knowledge or evaluations that will disappear with him and knowledge or evaluations the meaning and content of which is co-guaranteed by the consciousness of others (a postulate that, naturally enough, remains subjective, but that would certainly efface itself if it were wholly baseless). This interpretation reconstructs the concept of collective consciousness as a theory of reference groups, and treats the collective consciousness of society (the reference group of *all* communication partners) as only a marginal or extreme case.

9. On the polysignificance of the concept *conscience collective* and on the distinction between a normative, a subjective, and an objective cultural meaning, cf. Bohannan 1960. Bohannan also (p. 79f.) stresses that this polysignificance cannot be broken down into an internally relational nexus precisely because it is intended as a diffuse unity.

10. Incidentally, the methodological considerations that made Durkheim decide first to carry out functional analyses (especially of religion) on primitive societies originate here. In such societies, functionality can be inferred from simple or mechanical reactions and does not depend on any intervening consciousness. This, of course, presupposes that one must not conceive societal functions themselves as variables dependent upon evolution, and that the inner structure of a phenomenon will remain the same, whether individuals are made conscious of it or not (p. 87).

11. On the significance of this problem for later theoretical developments, cf. Sjoberg and Cain (1971). See also the utterly uncomprehending response by Parsons in the same volume; it conveys an impression of how Durkheim might have answered.

12. With the subtitle "The Sociologist as Moralist" René König summarizes his parallel judgment of Durkheim (1976, p. 312ff).

13. From the very beginning, self-reference and the ability to experience the other as another self were presupposed. Fundamental here are the eighth and ninth books of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, esp. 1166^{a}31f.

14. Durkheim also ignored Rousseau's analyses of property and the division of labor, e.g., in the second part of the *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1964, pp. 164ff). See Grange 1957, pp. 143–55.

15. In the "General Statement" of Parsons and Shils (1951a, p. 16), we read, for example: "There is a double contingency inherent in interaction.

On the one hand, ego's gratifications are contingent on his selection among available alternatives. But, in turn, alter's reaction will be contingent on ego's selection and will result from a complementary selection on alter's part. Because of this double contingency, communication, which is the precondition of cultural patterns, could not exist without both *generalization* from the particularity of specific situations (which are never identical for ego and alter) and *stability* of meaning which can only be assured by 'conventions' observed by both parties."

16. Kemper 1975 discusses this question. Especially justified is the comment that Durkheim's generalization of the concept of the division of labor contradicts his intention of treating the phenomenon itself not as fundamental but as historically derivative.

17. A formulation of Julien Freund.

18. Such a claim accompanies the stereotypical Marxist branding of Durkheim as "bourgeois" in Hofmann 1973.

2. Ends, Domination, and System

1. Talcott Parsons has tried to close this gap. From the distinction between agent and situations on the one hand, and the distinction between inner and outer (given in every action-system) on the other, he derives a schema of four functional problems that every system must solve. His important thesis is that to these four system-problems correspond four dimensions of orientation (pattern variables), which completely (!) define the possible attitudes of the agent. These pattern variables are specificity/diffuseness, neutrality/affectivity, universalism/particularism, and quality/performance. Cf. Parsons, Bales, and Shils (1953, pp. 63ff., 163ff.); and Parsons (1960c, pp. 467–83). His original dependence upon Weber's typology of (means/ends) rational, affectual, and traditional action is hardly recognizable in the set of concepts Parsons eventually developed.

2. A mature presentation of its main ideas in the German literature can be found in Kosiol (1959). Representative for the Anglo-Saxon literature is Gulick and Urwick (1937).

3. In this sense the distinction is often made, following March and Simon (1958, pp. 155ff.), between operational and nonoperational goals. Cf. Selznick (1943, pp. 48ff.); Perrow (1961a); Mayntz (1963, pp. 66ff.); and from the perspective of new methods for rational decision-making, McKean (1958, pp. 25ff.).

4. For the internal consequences of this failure to set up goal programs, see Nokes (1960).

5. For a theoretical elaboration of this point, see Firey (1948), and also March and Simon (1958, pp. 124ff.).

6. Cf. Frank (1957; 1958–59) and Granick (1954, p. 266). See also the application of this idea to the Spanish Empire in Phelan (1960). Turner

(1947) and Banfield (1959) came independently to similar results. These analyses must be read against the background of the universal anthropological fact that social systems can to a large extent tolerate and process contradictory values, without their own stability being in danger. See, for example, Willems (1956).

7. Clark and Wilson (1961) treat this kind of motivation as a variable; from this viewpoint, they construct different types of organization. See also Cyert and March (1959; 1963, pp. 26ff.). Even the recent theory of rational organization tries to reserve questions of motivation for special treatment by means of "a theory of teams." Cf. Marschak (1955, p. 128); and Albach (1961, pp. 380ff.).

8. For a study of such a case see the account of the Townsend movement for old age care in the U.S.A. by Messinger (1955).

9. For the contradiction between the fulfillment and presentation of ends in general, cf. Goffman (1959); for a concrete example in American hospitals, see Perrow (1961a).

10. For the beginning of the critique of the concept of hierarchy in the twenties, cf. Metcalf and Urwick (1941) and Jost (1932, pp. 52ff.). For the present state of discussion, cf. Bahrdt (1958); Lepsius (1960; pp. 19, 27ff.); Schelsky (1961, pp. 20ff.); Thompson (1961); and Delany (1963). A direct critique of the traditional command-model of authority can be found in Leibenstein (1960, pp. 162ff.).

11. This point has been most pursued not by the sociology of organizations, but by the theory of rational organization. Cf., e.g., Simon (1957, p. 174) and Cyert and March (1959; 1963). It is the distinction between formal and informal organization and the corresponding opposition between rational and emotional logic that has deprived the sociology of organizations of this insight. Irle (1963, pp. 17, 70) is pertinent here.

12. It was Parsons who first recognized and insisted upon the importance of the fact that Weber did not see the difference between a bureaucratic and a specialized and professional orientation (1947, pp. 52ff.). On the superior knowledge of the subordinate, see Thompson (1961), Drucker (1952), Gusfield (1961), and Blau and Scott (1962, pp. 244ff.). It is particularly surprising, though untypical, that this problem arises in research organizations. See Brown (1954), Weiss (1956), and Marcson (1960).

13. Cf. the example of the position occupied within a firm by the traveling salesman in Dreyfuss (1933, pp. 89ff.).

14. This idea can already be found in Sieben (1928, p. 131).

15. Cf. Bahrdt (1958, pp. 28ff., 98ff.); and Blau (1957, p. 60 f.); and for the increasing interest in horizontal relations in general, cf. Chapple and Sayles (1961, pp. 18ff.) and Landsberger (1961).

16. On this point see the interesting claim of Burns (1954, p. 95) that only around half of the times that a superior meant to give a directive or formal decision was his behavior correctly understood by his subordinates.

17. This is the conclusion to which recent German sociology of the firm has come; cf. Bahrdt (1958); Lepsius (1960, pp. 19, 27ff.); Popitz, et al. (1957, pp. 211 ff.)—whereas American research still puts hope in the superior's being taught to promote motivation indirectly.

18. This claim should not be confused with Parsons' more basic thesis that Weber's idea of social action and its modes of orientation is the expression of a general theory of the action-system and, especially, of the social action-system. Cf. Parsons (1949). We are presupposing this thesis as we go on to determine here at what points systems theory, decisively influenced by Parsons himself, has been developed beyond Weber.

19. We are not reverting here to the old "organic" theory of corporations, which Weber (1956, p. 7f.) rightly opposed. Instead, we are appealing to the success of recent, rigorous models from biology. One of the bridges by which they have influenced the social sciences was surely the connection between L. J. Henderson and Talcott Parsons. Cf. Parsons' report (1953, p. 619). In addition, Ludwig von Bertalanffy's elaboration of biological ideas of equilibrium into a General Systems Theory has had an important influence. Cf., e.g., Bertalanffy (1949; 1950).

20. In traditional ontological metaphysics, the concept of system—as in a different way the concepts of hierarchy or movement—served to blur the dangerous question posed by the Eleatics: how can a being exist apart from nonbeing?

21. Many crusades on behalf of humanity have been undertaken against the analogy between social systems and machines, which even in Weber plays a metaphorical role. However, the erroneous core of this analogy has seldom been recognized and so seldom rejected. It lies not in the mechanical conception of movement, but rather in the fact that all the parts of a machine are geared to the pursuit of a single end, whereas social systems must be constructed and rationalized in a multi-functional way.

22. The rejection of traditional determinism is seldom expressed in so general a form. Characteristically, it can at times be found in elaborations of the input/output model, which we shall discuss below. Cf. Knox (1955, p. 195) and Argyris (1962, p. 63).

23. That is, somewhat differently formulated, Weber's concept of domination. He defines domination by means of obedience, and obedience by means of the idea that the one who is obedient is oriented merely toward the command as such and not toward its actual worth (1956, p. 122f.). Recent formulations of this concept, however, no longer presuppose that commands are the only form of communication nor that the person in authority occupies a higher rank. Cf., Barnard (1938, pp. 161ff.) and Simon (1976).

24. On this possibility of creating derivative, nonhierarchical authority by means of "conditional programming" in the decision process, cf. Luhmann (1964b).

25. Sociological role-theory has made a clean break with these theories. It has pointed to the distanced, mediated relation that an individual bears to the social system. Plessner (1960) is good on this point. Weber himself did not think that the human personality could as a whole find a place in sociological theory because of his methodological views about the necessity for conceptual abstraction and his radical separation of sociology from psychology. But the claim that sociology can do justice to man only in a piecemeal way obscures the quite different problem that man only participates piecemeal in social systems.

26. While the well-known criticism of these tendencies by social philosophy is of long standing, in organizations research voices are seldom raised against the general effort to improve motivation continually. Dubin has some insightful remarks in Tannenbaum et al. (1961, p. 413).

27. A similar typology, from the viewpoint of which section of the environment chiefly profits from an organization, has been proposed by Blau and Scott (1962, pp. 40ff.). Cf. Presthus (1961), whose thesis is that in addition to Weber's model of bureaucracy, aimed at the interests of nonmembers, there is another model which, in spite of its similar formal structure, chiefly serves the members themselves.

28. The reasons for this lie partly in the radical separation between sociology and psychology we have already mentioned. It led Weber to an unpsychological concept of motivation that was supposed to come into relief through the construction of ideal types of understandable reasons for action. Besides, the important distinction between motivation as a member and motivation to perform first became necessary after the discovery of "informal" structures of motivation. It is thus of recent date. Cf. Barnard (1938, p. 227f.) and Leibenstein (1960, pp. 174ff.).

29. His discussion of the regulations governing representative authority (1956, p. 25) and his conclusion that under particular circumstances the action of one member is attributed to all, form, to be sure, an important contribution. But here, too, there is lacking the decisive *functional* insight into the sense of this rule as a mechanism for *transferring effects* from one environment to another.

30. That surprised Parsons, too. Cf. Parsons (1947, p. 12).

3. Talcott Parsons

1. Cf. the idea of a practical, social epistemology in Bershady (1973).

2. This leads historically to a critique of the meaning/expression schema of the *Geisteswissenschaften*. Cf. Parsons (1949, p. 473ff.).

3. The reasons for this reformulation may have been (1) the abstraction of the means/ends-schema into the dichotomy instrumental/consumatory of the AGIL-grid, and (2) the restructuring of the pattern variables along the distinction-orientation/modality.

4. Lidz (1976), p. 125. Cf. Turner (1947, p. 11f.). Lidz refers to Parsons (1951), Chapters 1 and 2, as well as to Parsons and Shils (1951b). In these texts, however, we find transitional formulations, and not the short and compressed one cited above. That formulation became possible only in reaction to later theoretical developments.

5. In turn, this refers back to Parsons' methodological distinction between generalization and respecification. Cf. Ackerman and Parsons (1966, p. 36f.).

6. "Action I define as a System" says Parsons (1968c), 14.

7. E.g. Parsons (1949, p. 77) and Parsons (1951, p. 24) with reference to "unit acts."

8. Cf. Parsons (1949, p. 730). This is, in effect, to claim that the theory's reference to reality is *already secured at the level of its fundamental concepts and axioms.* Contrast, for example, formal economic theory, whose fundamental concepts and axioms are not geared toward real phenomena, so that every increase in its fundamental conceptual apparatus regularly multiplies its distance from reality.

9. On this point, see Parsons (1934/35) and (1966b). For a critique of this position see, in particular, Burger (1977).

10. This is also noted by Lidz (1976, p. 125f.).

11. It should be clear from the preceding remarks that this question is in no way identical to the much debated question of whether there is a gap between the voluntaristic and subjective action approach and Parsons' later development of systems theory. The latter question does not join issue with Parsons' theory at the level on which it actually operates, and in any case it is too crudely formulated. In this regard, cf. the distinction between "formal" and "substantive voluntarism" in Alexander (1978).

12. No additional discussion is needed to show that merely superimposing grids upon one another (Parsons [1960c]) does not adequately answer this question.

13. This is why the theory of interchanges and their symbolically generalized media correctly enters *at this point.*

14. A separate investigation would be required to determine how narrowly these terms are interpreted when introduced.

15. Parsons (1949, p. 756) himself saw this problem, even if he inadequately formulated it as the conditions for avoiding skepticism. At that time, however, he did not see the grid as a way of solving this problem.

16. Another question has to do with the precision of the concepts and their consequences. E.g. Turner (1974), p. 49f. I shall leave this aside here.

17. See the remarks on the "second best type of theory" (Parsons 1951, p. 20f).

18. For this point Parsons referred (in conversation) to Jakobson and Halle (1956). Cf. also Halle (1957), Ashby (1972, p. 81).

19. This distinction in the sense of Günther (1968, p. 335f.).

20. Signs of this may be found in Geyer and van der Zouwen (1978).

21. In this sense Maturana (1970) speaks of a biological epistemology.

22. Mesarovic and Macko (1969, p. 33) speak of "asymmetrical interdependence."

23. For the limitations of this form see Alexander (1965).

24. Cf. Brown (1972) and, in response to that, Varela (1978).

25. Even the discussion in Herbst (1976, p. 84f.), also a response to Spencer-Brown, deduces from a primary structural dichotomy (system/environment) a distinction between time (before/after) and form (is/is not).

26. Ritsert (1966). But Ritsert (1968) claims that this does not suffice for a reconstruction of the autonomous subject. That may be. But in hindsight it is more Parsons' proximity to the concept of the subject that keeps his systems theory from adequately grasping the connection between self-reference and autonomy.

27. Levins (1973, p. 113), writes: "Our argument . . . is that the dynamics of an arbitrary complex system will result in a simplified structuring of that complexity."

28. For these two problems see Schwanenberg (1971).

29. This aspect of political theory can also be understood as implicitly dealing with the problem of complexity. In this regard, see Wilson (1975).

5. Positive Law and Ideology

1. Naturally we can characterize this limited potential as the *conditio humana* or as the "existential situation" of man, and thus as a cause of the formation of all ideologies. But it would not be a discriminating cause that would enable us to explain the rise of different ideologies. To do that, the concept of "existential situation" would have to be supplemented with social determinants over and above what is common to all humanity. In other words, it would have to be developed, not in terms of a "philosophical anthropology," but sociologically.

2. See, for example, the yearbook "General Systems," published since 1956, as well as the publications by Ashby cited below (note 5) or Wieser (1959).

3. A defect of Weber's concept of rational legitimacy, based on a belief in the legal order, was that it concealed this implausibility in an ideal type. The question of what social structures and processes can stabilize such an arbitrary principle was left unanswered. See also the critique in Blau (1963, p. 311f.).

4. Organization research is unfortunately lacking in theories about the division of labor in the decision process. The leading theories of the division of labor are oriented toward the sphere of production, and particularly toward production firms. Thus, the characteristic problem of decision theory—the overlap among domains of competency—does not arise.

5. That the complexity of a system must correspond to the complexity of its environment is one of the central theses of recent systems theory.

See, e.g., Ashby (1952; 1956); Harvey and Schroder (1963); and Schroder and Harvey (1963).

6. Insofar as the idea of "natural law" is maintained, it receives an ideological character in the sense to be defined shortly. It is firmly held on to, so that one can hold oneself firmly to it—in other words, in virtue of its function. That is a symptom of the fact that a restructuring process which occurred long ago at the level of roles and decision programs could not be completed at the level of "ultimate values." This is a developmental tension in the social order that has its own problems. Since ultimate values, which integrate society, are the most difficult to change, the ideological character of outmoded values fulfills an important transitional function.

7. The institutional aspect of party formation under these social conditions is emphasized by Huntington (1965), although without wishing to exclude the role of professional politics.

8. This is one of the reasons why legislation is ill-suited as a means for the speedy and revolutionary reorientation of the law. The Nazi recasting of German law after 1933 showed that the department of justice could act more quickly and thoroughly than parliament.

9. One must play a little dumb in order to reconstruct and appraise this acrobatic conceptual breakthrough. The prince had to give up full control over those rights whose legal validity derived from him alone. This feat was due to a mix of abstraction and sound common sense, which is characteristic of a good jurist. Cr. Grotius (1720, II, 14, § VIII); or the "Tractatus historico-politico-juridici de praeeminenti dominio principis et reipublicae in subditos, eorum bona, ac ius quaesitum" in Crusium (1668, chap. XIII, 5). For particulars about this legal development, see Gierke (1958, pp. 268ff.).

10. This realization is naturally easier when the values of others are the target. That is why in the nineteenth century the awareness of ideology took the form of "unmasking." The above-mentioned way of analyzing the relation between values and action as varying together and limiting each other contains nonetheless a fundamental insight that ultimately no one can honestly ignore. The exceptions that Marx made for the propertyless proletariat and Mannheim made for the free-floating intelligentsia are thus inconsistent on the basis of their own theories of ideology. What is possible is the transition from latent to manifest ideologies, as for example in the Marxist-Leninist concept of the "party."

11. This distinction between instrumental and expressive variables has, until now, been used chiefly in research into small groups and in theories of leadership. But from there it has found an entrance into the general theory of the social system. See, especially, Bales (1951); Parsons, Bales, and Shils (1953); Parsons and Bales (1955); Slater (1959). For an application to political ideologies, cf. Himmelstrand (1960).

12. The identical observation is made at the level of roles in studies on leadership roles, and presented as the so-called "dual leadership theory." See Etzioni (1965).

13. Understandably, Marxists thus defend themselves against the charge of being dogmatic. They do not want to tie themselves down to unchanging formulas for every occasion. See, for example, the textbook *Grundlagen der marxistischen Philosophie* (1961, p. 661f.). Whether they always succeed in preserving the reflexivity of their ideology in the face of dogmatizing tendencies is another question.

14. Both the unity of the party and a rigid, hierarchical organization are essential for preserving the reflexivity of this ideology. They guarantee a foreseeable likelihood of consensus and at the same time the decidability of all problems by means of intra-party discussion. Only in this way is it possible to preserve the indeterminate complexity of an ideology that makes theory and practice interdependent, while translating it into the determinate complexity of intra-party discussion, where what is important is whose agreement one has won for what position.

15. Aspects of this general idea have already been seen and formulated in numerous disciplines. In economics it found its classic expression in Böhm-Bawerk's (1921) theory of capital. In organization theory Kosiol (1959) calls "an organization . . . detour behavior in the service of control" (p. 18). In sociology Schneider (1962) speaks of "gain through indirection" (p. 500f.). The very same idea is meant by Gehlen (1958), when he characterizes increasing indirectness as a disburdening process (p. 68). Social psychologists like Thibaut and Kelley (1959) emphasize the advantages of "sequential patterns of interdependence" (p. 197). A particularly detailed treatment of this problem can be found in Deutsch (1963), who formulates it as a distinction between "primary" and "secondary" information and symbols (pp. 98ff., 200f.).

16. The identity in kind between the two coordinated processes—a possibility discussed and rejected by the tradition in regard to vision (see, for example, Plato, *Charmides* 167c f. or Plotinus, *Enneads* V, 3, especially §§ 8 and 10)—is decisive for this achievement. It is not a question of combinations like selling learning, deciding about action, or talking about the use of power. These may yield combinatorial gains, but they do not lead to that specific achievement which consists in strengthening selectivity. The selectivity of positing norms or values cannot be enhanced through power, speech, or payment, but instead only through repeating the same process: through normatively positing norms or through evaluating values.

17. This idea goes back to Spencer, even if this connection is awkward for present-day sociologists because they adhere to another concept of evolution (which implies neither causal nor historical necessity). For the view that differentiation is a criterion of progress, cf. Riggs (1957); Smelser (1959); Easton (1959, especially p. 240f.); Parsons (1961a); numerous contributions in LaPalombara (1963, e.g. pp. 39 ff.); Eisenstadt (1963; 1964).

18. As can be found in cybernetic systems theory. See, for example, the

definition of the concept "variety" in Ashby (1952; 1956) or Beer (1966, pp. 246ff.).

19. Gehlen and Schelsky have seen a problem here, although in different ways, and have discussed whether emancipated, reflective subjectivity can be accommodated in churches, biennial festivals, universities, etc. Cf. Gehlen (1956; 1957); Schelsky (1957); and again Gehlen (1961, pp. 74ff.).

20. This is not infrequently overlooked by theories of evolution that make use of the functional method and emphasize interdependences so strongly that transitional stages appear simply unstabilizable. A typical example is Riggs (1964).

21. I have touched on the connection between the differentiation of the political system from the rest of society and the positivization of law in Luhmann (1967a). For the general conception of the political system as a subsystem of society, which underlies my following remarks, cf. the recent works of Easton (1965a and b); Almond (1965); Luhmann (1965); Robson (1965); Wiseman (1966).

22. In connection with a theory of reflexive planning, cf. Luhmann (1966a).

23. This is only one distinction among many for the following reason. It refers only to the material, and not to the temporal and social generalization of behavioral expectations—i.e., only to the abstractness of the content at which they are coordinated, and not to the duration of this coordination or its chances for consensus.

24. For such interconnections it is essential that different actions are involved, but not whether these actions are "similar" in any way to one another. Cooking and sewing are connected in the role of housewife, without in any way resembling each other. We are not, therefore, speaking of an arrangement of actions into species and genera.

25. Cf. the idea of a "hierarchy of control," which has gained in importance in Parsons' system theory. However, in part Parsons uses other level-concepts (roles, collectivities, norms, values) and, indeed, postulates a hierarchical context in which the lower levels make the higher ones possible and the higher ones control the lower ones. My distinction between the different levels in the material generalization of behavioral expectations has no such pretensions. Short presentations of Parsons' idea can be found in Parsons (1960b, pp. 122ff.) or in Parsons (1964a, p. 36f.). Smelser (1962) works with similar distinctions (p. 32f.).

26. Accordingly, the function of ideology has recently been located at the level of roles and interpreted merely as a way for calming or explaining away role tensions. See, for example, Sutton, et al. (1956) or Thompson (1961, pp. 114ff.).

27. If the often used concepts "value hierarchy" or "value system" are supposed to imply this, that is an extremely unconsidered opinion. If not, it is unclear what they are supposed to mean. I prefer the expression "value

ordering" and mean by it nothing more than a particular combination of recognized values having a common function.

28. Particular, symbolically functional actions are required. See Edelman (1964).

29. This, too, depends on essential social preconditions. The ability to wait must be ensured, and a relatively high level of satisfaction must be attained with regard to all vital values before a value ordering can become so complex that the above-mentioned mechanisms can come into play.

30. The best proof of this is that means/ends considerations are normally located in the domain of "judicial discretion," which is inaccessible to further juristic exploration. Another proof would be that there is no even reasonably adequate juristic discussion of the logical and decision-theoretic problems of the means/ends schema. Not even a glimpse of the problem is visible. As a typical example, see Peters (1965).

31. That such an inference occurs again and again in even the highest courts is another question. See the penetrating critique in Klein (1965, p. 756f.). In addition, it should be noted that this rule has worked only for the untypical case where only one necessary means leads to a goal (cf.§ 89 of the Introduction to the *Allgemeines Landesrecht* or, for more precision, Kant (1897, p. 39) and where forbidden means were excluded (see, e.g., Wolff 1934, volume 1, §§ 32 and 37 as well as § 71, and note how far apart these passages are in the text!). Hence, in its heyday in the police state this idea was only a well disguised tautology, which left the jurist the freedom either to forbid an action because of the means or to permit it because of the end, depending on what reason and the circumstances demanded.

32. Such informants have a "derived nonhierarchical authority" over the decision-making process. Cf. Luhmann (1964a, pp. 97ff.; 1964b, pp. 22ff.).

33. Another question is whether the jurist lets his decisions be determined by his concepts in viewing the results they justify as law, or whether in contrast he manipulates his concepts with a view to the results he prefers. From a sociological viewpoint, the stabilizing function of the juristic treatment of legal problems probably depends on neither of these approaches becoming dominant and on its being unclear, in any particular case, which approach will be chosen.

34. For these problems in the legal domain, see Kirchheimer (1960). Naturally, one way out is to declare limited conceptual domains to be ideologically indifferent and innocuous. Through such an arrangement sociology would seem to install itself in the sphere of influence of Marxist ideology. Cf. Kiss (1966, especially pp. 21ff.). However, it cannot be predicted whether dynamite might not collect in such a circumscribed domain, anymore than it can be predicted that such a domain might not one day assume control of positing norms and values and that the current ideology might not rigidify into religion, and be paid reverence on Sundays.

6. The Autonomy of the Legal System

1. Friedman (1975) deploys a similar concept. Talcott Parsons, for example, views the emergence of a discrete legal system—specializing in the problems of interpreting norms—as characteristic of highly advanced social development. See, for instance, Parsons (1961a, esp. p. 248f.); and (1971, pp. 18ff. and *passim*).

2. The argument that freedom depends upon constraints has a general relevance for systems theory. It has recently been discussed under various conceptual rubrics such as "hierarchy" and "decomposition." For an introduction, see Simon (1969); Whyte, Wilson, and Wilson (1969); and Pattee (1973).

3. For a further analysis of this point with reference to legally regulated behavioral expectations, see Luhmann (1972a).

4. The argument picked up here and pursued in what follows has caused great difficulties for the theory of rational behavior and especially for game theory. Cf., for instance, Howard (1971).

5. On "inclusion," in this sense, see Luhmann (1975c, esp. p. 160f.).

6. This is Parsons' concept of "functional primacy." See, for instance, Parsons and Smelser (1956, pp. 15f.).

7. Concerning this particular "input," from the standpoint of the theory of exchange, see Eckhoff (1976, p. 15f.).

8. See selection 7.

9. A noteworthy case study of this problem is Aubert (1967). See also Knoppke-Wetzel (1976a and b). Recent case studies of legislative reforms from various viewpoints all concentrate predominantly on structural reasons for the failure of such reforms. They thereby presuppose as self-evident that legislation alone cannot solve legal problems. See, for instance, Naschold (1967); Mayhew (1967); Luhmann (1974a); Offe (1975).

10. Compelling reasons for this can be formulated clearly within the framework of systems theory. In note 2 above, we have already noted one line of research within which this topic is being pursued.

11. For current analyses and a recent bibliography, see Volume 34 of the *Veröffentlichungen der Vereinigung der Deutschen Staatsrechtslehrer* concerned with "binding" judges to the law and the constitution.

12. Similar conclusions have been drawn by applying empirical methods of social research to the field of ethics. See Schmitt (1964); Schwartz (1968). See also Spaemann (1975).

13. For a skeptical analysis, see Luhmann (1974b). The prevailing view in jurisprudence itself, however, is much more optimistic. Cf. especially Teubner (1975); and Schöneborn (1976).

14. A formulation with which Diderot rebukes a scientifically oriented doctor in "Rêve de d'Alembert," (1951, p. 961).

15. For a practical example, see Schollen (1976).

16. This is not to deny that there are considerable possibilities of organizational improvement. The discrepancy reported by Gessner (1976, p. 238) between arrangements for legal aid in Mexico City (where there are 3000 cases a year) and in Hamburg (60,000 cases per year), could certainly be influenced by suitable organizational measures.

17. See the survey of related experiences in the United States, Knoppke-Wetzel (1976b).

18. It is thus very significant that German law students make their career decisions immediately after receiving their degree, and thereby label themselves for life as either *Justizjuristen*, *Anwälte*, *Verwaltungsjuristen* or *Wirtschaftsjuristen*. In contrast to this state of affairs (typical for Germany), three-quarters of American jurists are simply "lawyers" and their careers are channeled through the lawyers' profession. For the details of this contrast, see Rueschemeyer (1973).

7. Politics as a Social System

1. Easton (1965a) and many other systems theorists use an "analytical" concept of system.

2. The Christian monastery is the classic example for this. See also the idea of "total institution" in Goffman (1962).

3. Here arise difficulties for a concept that views the state as an association consisting of men while it emphasizes "a separation between state and society."

4. Levy (1966) sees in this complex differentiation of roles one reason for the prevalence of rational (achievement-oriented), universalistic, functionally specific and emotionally neutral (non-intimate) orientations in civilized social orders (1:197).

5. On the general historical shift from ascriptive to efficiency-oriented political recruitment, see for instance Easton (1959, p. 244f.); Levy (1966, 2:440ff.); and Bendix (1964, p. 115f.).

6. Huntington (1965) correctly sees in this connection between complexity and forms of recruitment a guarantee for a high degree of autonomy of the political system (p. 402f.).

7. I remember the handwritten lament in the administrative document of a ministerial undersecretary: "Everyone wants everything at once."

8. This is why there are only two types of programs for the rationalization of administration: goal programs concerned with the environmental effects of a system's behavior and conditional programs concerned with the environmental causes of a system's behavior. For a systems-theoretic justification of this type of program, see Luhmann (1964b). On the types of programs themselves, see Eckhoff and Jacobsen (1960).

9. The problems of the German Democratic Republic [East Germany]

before the erection of the wall are a good example of this. As long as everyone living on its territory could protest against specific decisions by leaving the "system," the different levels we have been discussing could not be sufficiently separated. Only by eliminating easy emigration could the system secure its autonomy even for unpopular decisions.

10. Typical danger points in this sense are political parties oriented toward particular classes or interests and the division of administrative departments according to different constituencies (agriculture, refugees, veterans, science, etc.). But in relation to the basic differentiation of the political system into politics and administration these are secondary forms of differentiation. Their disintegrating consequences can still be arrested.

11. In contrast to this, the first stage of the autonomous political system—*domination* differentiated according to hierarchical rank instead of specific functions—has much simpler prerequisites and has taken various independent forms in the course of history.

12. Only rarely has this opinion been openly expressed. However, it does serve as a capsule summary of a number of other ideas in which it is involved. The essence of politics has sometimes been assumed to lie in such extremely general goals as justice, peace, and the public good, whose overcomplexity points toward the need for decision-making. Others treat such overcomplexity in a completely unstructured way, seeing the essence of politics in correspondingly drastic reductions of this overcomplexity: the irrational acceptance of responsibility or friend/foe schemas. The whole realm of administration then becomes excluded from politics. Many authors sum up the means for reducing this complexity in the idea of power, whose acquisition and exercise constitute the distinctive feature of political behavior. Still others formalize the traditional goals as "goal attainment" (Parsons) or as the "distribution of values" (Easton). We can reduce these views to the thesis that society's enormous complexity needs to be reduced through authoritative decision-making and that this requires, first, the differentiation of behavior and situations, then—as society grows more complex—the differentiation of roles, and finally the differentiation of an increasingly complex subsystem of politics from the rest of society.

13. This distinction has been developed especially by sociopsychological research on the effective change of organizations. See among others Kahn, et al. (1964, pp. 396 ff.). Political sociology should pay more attention to this distinction.

14. Parsons (1966b) formulates this point in the following way: "When the political aspect of social structure is sufficiently differentiated from the others, *all* authority is 'rational-legal' in Weber's sense. His two other types of authority [with a stronger dependence on issues and motives—N.L.] occur when structural differentiation is relatively incomplete."

15. Comparable abstractions also have to be secured in other processes of structural differentiation and functional specification. For example, the family is founded on love, which should be experienced as passion re-

gardless of social status, income, religion, occupation, or ability to work. Or again, the differentiation of scientific research from the rest of society makes men abstract "subjects" who have to accept intersubjectively transmissible knowledge, regardless of social status, income, power, religion, group membership, or nationality. Such abstractions give the differentiated system a potential which Parsons (1966a) calls "greater generalized adaptive capacity" (p. 110) and for which he gives many more examples.

16. The special problem posed by this form of legitimacy has been seen by jurists for some time and by sociologists at least since Max Weber. Nonetheless, until now practically nothing has been done to explain how such legitimacy is socially possible and what social structures and processes such a variable political system must presuppose.

17. We can assume that such an *increase in power* also changes the *distribution of power*. Questions about the distribution of power, which up until now have chiefly attracted the attention of political science, are of secondary importance in our theory of the political system, though not therefore of less importance than before. The same is true for Parsons' political sociology. Cf. Mitchell (1967, pp. 90, 108, 110).

18. A correspondence (though not an equality!) between a system's complexity and that of its environment appears to be a central thesis of cybernetics. See the law of "requisite variety" in Ashby (1956, pp. 206ff.) as well as the statement of this relation in Harvey and Schroder (1963).

19. In this spirit Kolakowski (1960) warns his Marxist comrades not to remain faithful to their principles but to keep abreast of current developments.

20. I have discussed this idea as a limit to all enlightenment in Luhmann (1967c).

21. This change in the constellation of motives is possible only if roles in the political system have been differentiated from other social roles. If the political struggle is fought constantly on the basis of these other roles (as struggles between Catholics and Protestants, proletarians and capitalists, city dwellers and the rural population, and so on), the politicization of the conflict does not lead to its solution by purely political means, but instead to its generalization and intensification. This is the danger of *Verzuiling*, a term from Dutch sociology. See Kruijt (1959); Geismann (1964, pp. 85ff.); and Lipset (1962, pp. 18ff., 77ff.). On conflict management under these conditions, see Lehmbruch (1967).

22. Here is one example: A superior's power over his subordinates rests basically on his ability to give orders; he can set forth the conditions that his subordinates may violate only by risking their membership in the system. The subordinates' power over their superior rests, among other things, on the fact that they can narrow or broaden issues for decision-making. That is, they can overburden him with complexity. The relative distribution of power, then, is determined by who connects what choices with what alternatives to be avoided. And the power that can be activated in the system depends on each of these paths of power being sufficiently differ-

entiated from the other (in regard both to situations and to issues). Only then will one power not block the other.

23. A brilliant discussion of a restructuring process that then becomes necessary, without necessarily leading to democracy, can be found in Riggs (1966).

24. Weber's ideal type of bureaucratic authority offers a precise formulation of this principle for one sector of the political system. But the principle also holds for politicians and for the roles of the public in the political system. Politicians are necessarily influenced by considerations of reelection; they must see their role as primarily part of the system and not as a mere appendix of another of their roles (union secretary, Catholic, landowner). And the public must be able to react to past decisions of the political system and not, for instance, just to economic emergencies, family pressures, or personal problems.

25. One part of this problem, the linking of politics and administration through reflexive planning, is discussed in Luhmann (1966a).

26. Analytically speaking, it is the same principle of separating and rendering independent subsystems for specific functions. Now we are only referring to a different system and are talking no longer of the differentiation of society, but rather of the differentiation of its political system.

27. As a distinction between preparing decisions and executing them, the separation of politics and administration is of course an old one. We can trace it back to the simplest tribal societies. But those societies, given their homogeneous social structure, only differentiated between situations and situation-dependent, segmented, or hierarchical relations, and not between systems of roles permanently working alongside each other. Only very complex societies can achieve such a demanding form of organization. See Smith (1956, 1960).

28. This question of the boundaries of social systems refers to behavioral contexts. It should not be confused with the familiar question of territorial borders. Today it appears to be accepted that territorial borders were important even for the simplest tribal societies and thus do not form a sufficient condition for the later "rise of the State." See, for example, Schapera (1956). But it is equally certain that the symbolic meaning of territorial borders for delineating behavioral contexts must change as a society's structure shifts from segmented to functional differentiation.

29. The interdependence between external and internal differentiation can be demonstrated with two contrasting examples. (1) *Developing countries* often have difficulties separating the political system from its links with other social roles. For that reason alone they are unable to institutionalize a clear separation between politics and administration. A common argument is that when society lacks functional differentiation the separation of politics and administration generally becomes more difficult. See, for example, La Palombara (1963, p. 41f.) and Pye (1963, p. 36f.). (2) *Ideologically integrated societies* strive to politicize society and therefore try

to confine the differentiation of the political system from the rest of society to the level of roles, rather than to expand it to a differentiation of values, norms, and goals. For this kind of society, too, it becomes difficult to accept a discrepancy between ideological-political behavior and technical-bureaucratic administrative practice. The advantages of such a differentiation have to be secured latently, against the official version of things, and the bureaucrat bears the risk of this deviation.

30. We may mention Eisenhower and deGaulle as examples of how in highly differentiated societies a significant departure of politicians from their original roles nonetheless occurs. See Converse and Dupeux (1966).

31. Stein Rokkan (1961) has emphasized that elections too, with their formal principles of universality, equality, and secrecy, aim at the separation of roles.

32. Ellwein (1966) discovered this, too, and formulated it as a critical question (pp. 212f.).

33. The constant complaints about reverse communication, about the influence of interest-groups on the administration, of the administration on politics, and of politics on the voters result from this built-in privilege given to the dominant direction of communication. Sociology, however, should not immediately join this chorus of complaints, but rather should understand that both reverse communication and its underprivileged status which separates it from the dominant direction of communication fulfill a significant function.

34. Smelser (1962) mentions the following structural prerequisites for a "political bandwagon: (1) A highly differentiated political structure; (2) an institutionalized 'political rationality' whereby decisions are relatively unencumbered by nonpolitical considerations; (3) the possibility of committing and withdrawing political support; (4) a generalized medium of exchange—in this case power . . ." (p. 180).

35. Parsons' analysis (1964b) of the dangers of a "power deflation" (pp. 60f., 65f.) seems to go in a similar direction.

36. For the corresponding antithesis between emotional and functional stabilization, see Luhmann (1964a, pp. 372ff.).

37. Cybernetics especially has seen that maintaining sufficiently vague structures poses problems. See Beer (1962), who follows Ashby's analysis of social systems.

38. Thus, Bourricaud (1961) calls power legitimate "qui accepte ou même qui institue son propre procès de légitimation" [which accepts or even which institutes its own process of legitimation] (p. 7).

39. See footnote 15.

40. The fact that behavior has to be oriented by values while in the same system values have to be oriented by behavior is a clear symptom of high and vague complexity. Managing such complexity requires (as we have already seen in the case of reciprocal power) a structural separation of situations.

41. All these viewpoints are integrated in Charles Lindblom's theory of political decision-making. See especially Braybrooke and Lindblom (1963) and Lindblom (1965). The confrontation of this theory with the problems of developing countries, on which Lindblom is now at work, will probably make its system-theoretic premises more explicit.

42. On a different level this loose relationship with the past is also expressed by the fact that ideologically integrated systems must reformulate their relevant history with every change of course. Recall the change of emphasis in Nazi history books from Widukind to Charlemagne during the Second World War.

43. This is expressed for instance in the legal idea of the right to fulfill plans.

44. American sociologists strive for a wider definition of career which is not confined to organizations. See, for instance, Strauss (1959), Moore (1963), and Roth (1963).

45. A limited aspect under which this question is discussed today is characterized by the key word "pluralism." While in the Western and recently also in the Eastern European literature (Wiatr 1966) this term has been treated with growing respect, its limitation to groups and interests has not been transcended.

46. This is in part because it presupposes very complex personalities; it partially shifts the burden of choice to personal behavior. See Stager (1967).

47. For this reason, systems theory often arrives at very pessimistic, perhaps too pessimistic, conclusions about the possibilities of stabilizing transitional situations. For the case of developing countries, see Riggs (1961, 1964).

48. On this point, see Eisenstadt (1963), whose theoretical approach is similar to our own insofar as he emphasizes the interdependence of functional differentiation, functional specification, and subsystem autonomy.

49. Something similar holds true for other evolutionary achievements as well. For this, see Parsons (1964a).

50. In the history of European thought such transitional functions were performed for example by (1) the medieval hierarchical model of the sources of law which enabled the positivization of law to occur at first within the framework of a supposedly "higher" law; (2) absolute monarchy and democracy—concepts allowing innovations to be understood as mere changes in the form of authority; that is, they acted as traditional categories that concealed the extent of the required structural changes; (3) the concept of nation-state, which shifted the integration of the political system from the level of a role (the ruler) to the level of a value; in other words, it ensured a more abstract form of integration. Remarkably, in all these cases (and in many others) the transition was based on an understanding of the problem that was correct but not totally adequate. The concept of the nation-state made the change possible by concealing its full significance.

8. The Political Code

1. Cf. Harris (1968), especially the chapter on the logic of dichotomies.

2. Ordinary definitions do not go very far. Consider for example: "A code can be defined as any group of symbols that can be structured in a way that is meaningful to some person" (Berlo 1960, p. 57).

3. For comments on an earlier version of this article and for an illuminating discussion on certain technical expressions in linguistics, I am much indebted to Siegfried J. Schmidt.

4. For the significance of the principle of "complementary instruction" for the biological development of macromolecules, see Eigen (1971, esp. 492ff.). See also Monod (1970).

5. Following Kant's usage (*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B176ff.), "schema" means not only the rule, but also the unity of the movement from one rule to another. Thus, a schematized movement is always more universal than its end product. Arrival at the preferred result (at property, justice, or truth) does not put an end to the movement itself. The very contingency of the end product, in fact, means that the movement will be thrust back to the counterpart, i.e., the opposite (propertylessness, injustice, falsehood). It can only come to rest in the consciousness of contingency. (The language of this note is unsatisfying because it naïvely presupposes a concept of "movement" [*Bewegung*] borrowed from traditional philosophical discussions of the problem of continuity. A much more precise study of the problem of selective processes would be required in order to introduce concepts with greater analytical precision and fruitfulness.)

6. From a *psychological* viewpoint, for example, established falsehoods are by no means equivalent to established truths. Thus, psychologists have observed that falsehoods are more frequently and readily corroborated than truths. Cf. Kanouse (1971, esp. 124f.). The logical code (essential to science) must exclude such psychological asymmetries in the interest of an equal distribution of chances for any given theory to be true or false.

7. This is the very reason why *tu quoque* arguments (appeals to parallel cases of illegal behavior) are forbidden.

8. This is the consideration upon which Gaston Bachelard erects his theory of scientific development (1938). Cf. Bachelard (1962). Bachelard's detailed analyses make clear how a functional subsystem of society (in this case, science) can become dynamic and thus embark on its own "eccentric" historical development.

9. Jürgen Habermas takes this into account with formulations such as "consensus about the truth or falsehood of propositions" or "consensus about the truth-value of the corresponding utterance" (in Luhman and Habermas 1971, pp. 125, 129). In the meantime, however, there vanishes any chance for employing "consensus" (even under outlandishly idealized conditions) as a *criterion* of truth.

10. In their undervaluation of this problem (and that means by underrating the problem of theodicy), Habermas and Parsons are in full agree-

ment. Both of them have already "solved" the problem of evil—Habermas with his notion of the "enemy," and Parsons according to his idea of "costs." And presumably, next to a predilection for this or that value, it is the specific variant of theodicy which conveys the impression that an author is progressive or conservative.

11. The abstractness of "concrete cases" is thoroughly acknowledged in the professional methodological literature. Cf. Ray (1926, pp. 154ff.); Bund (1965); Hruschka (1965); and Hardwig (1967).

12. On such "decodification" procedures, on their criteria and methods, see Gusseck (1972).

13. On the "interactional" difficulties of escaping from the logic of dichotomies, cf. Gusseck (1972, pp. 83ff.) who gives examples from the field of arbitration. Social scientists have an analogous experience whenever they try to dispute not merely the labels of "conservative" or "progressive" but also the relevance of the binary schema itself.

14. This can be shown quite well in the case of the evolution of Greek law: the classical theory of natural law developed in conjunction with democratic political control over the law. On this transformation, see Ostwald (1969). For the corresponding "ideological superstructure" hovering above Chinese legislative activity (i.e., a morality codified in literature, with which the "nobility" identified itself and which the Emperor controlled), see Bünger (1946; 1952); T'ung-Tsu Ch'ü (1961, esp. p. 226ff.); Bodde and Morris (1967, p. 3ff.).

15. For a discussion of this concept applied to the parallel example of the terminology of illness, see Frake (1961).

16. A model of the typical solution employed in ancient high cultures is offered by the Chinese gentry. Cf. Eberhard (1965, esp. pp. 89ff., on the problem of the transferal of power); in a more universal and comparative vein, see Eisenstadt (1963).

17. As an analysis of the process of political decision-making and its consequences from this point of view, cf. Mayhew (1967).

18. For the reaction to this experience on the part of the philosophy of history, cf. Baumgartner (1972).

19. For repercussions on the process of political decision-making, cf. Schnur (1966).

20. This is something that can occasionally be unearthed by empirical research. For the above mentioned examples, see Ronneberger (1970); and the (as far as I know, unpublished) report of the Prognos AG Basel on supporting the middle classes. See the reports in the *Frankfurter Allgemeinen Zeitung*, January 31 and February 4, 1972.

21. On some social functions of legislation, see Hirsch and Rehbinder (1967).

22. It sometimes happens that words "switch parties." For example, a certain aversion to technology (exhibited in a word such as "technocracy") has traveled from the conservative to the progressive side. What makes this possible is the fact that the entire context of theoretical discussion has

become "structurally autonomous" and thus neither conservative nor progressive intellectuals have any real contact with technology.

23. This has always been self-evident in the case of progressive ideologies. For conservative ideologies the same insight was made familiar by Mannheim (1927).

24. The report has been published (together with 11 supplementary volumes which include all the recommendations and inquiries instigated by the Commission) by Nomos Verlag, Baden-Baden.

25. Cf. also the (at that time already published) "Vorschläge für ein einheitliches Dienstrecht" in *Verwaltung in der Reform*, Volume 1, edited by the Berlin Senator for Domestic Affairs (June 1970).

26. See the *Verhandlungen des 48. Deutschen Juristentages*, vol. 2, Sitzungsberichte Teil 0, on the theme "Is it advisable to reorganize the Civil Service Law in response to changes in State and society?" The paper and concluding remarks of Helmut Quaritsch deserve special consideration in light of the sociological problems which concern us here. For further discussion of this point, see the brochure distributed by the Deutsche Beamtenbund in September 1970, *Bedrohung einer Verfassungsinstitution: Kritische Bemerkungen zum Gutachten Prof. Dr. Thiemes über die Neuordnung des Beamtenrechts.*

27. The Deutsche Postgewerkschaft (German Postal Trade Union), in its declaration of principles of May 11, 1973, makes the marvelous claim that the majority of the Study Commission "contradicted" the whole of the Study Commission.

28. Cf. Katkov (1937). About the peculiarity of "inconvertible polarities" see Thompson (1963).

29. Hypotheses are offered by Bailey (1965); and—it seems independently—by Olsen (1972). See, furthermore, Bucher (1970).

30. Cf. the distinction between "approval" and "esteem" (aligned with the specific/diffuse distinction) in Parsons (1951, esp. pp. 108, 182).

31. This occurs, unfortunately, and despite unwavering appeals to Marx, in numerous Marxist polemics against "bourgeois sociology." For instance, Löwe and Lanfermann (1973).

32. Relevant here is the well-known argument of welfare economics that surpluses make it possible to compensate for collateral disadvantages. Cf. Kaldor (1939); Hicks (1939). The argument presupposes, incidentally, a strong State as well as an erosion through taxation of liberal-constitutional safeguards on property.

9. The Economy as a Social System

1. The incompatibility of the two traditions has rarely been asserted explicitly. Nonetheless, cf. Cohen (1902, p. 280ff.) or Angyal (1939).

2. In sociology this technique of separating system levels from system references is characteristic of Parsons' work. In addition Ramsöy (1963) addresses this question. The logical problems this technique gives rise to have not been clarified. This is particularly true of the question whether the acceptance of a metalanguage, in order to describe the change in system references, is connected with the choice of a new system reference, namely that of the encompassing system.

3. For further details, see Luhmann (1970e). For the application of this idea to the theory of the goal orientation of systems, see also Luhmann (1968a, especially p. 114f.).

4. That does not mean that they are false, but only that their intent must be elaborated in a more complicated and abstract conceptual system.

5. Secession is a typical way that segmental societies have of adapting: individual clans may remove themselves from the social contract and begin their own life. This sort of solution cannot be transferred to functionally differentiated societies.

6. Although I cannot justify it here, I think that evolutionary accomplishments in making sense of experience are always bound up with the introduction and institutionalization of risk-prone possibilities of negation.

7. Thus an important initial question is whether relations can be viewed and negated as units, i.e. whether adequate linguistic and conceptual possibilities are present. For many archaic societies the answer must be "no." See, e.g., Lee (1940).

8. This level of formalization also gives access to important structural parallels, which could prove important to a more fundamental reworking of economic theory. For example, it would (a) bring in a theory of time which would also have to be based on the possibility of negating one or the other term of a relation, i.e. of holding constant either temporally specified events or present circumstances, in order to let the other vary (cf. Luhmann 1968a, p. 7ff.). And (b) it would incorporate a theory of economically rational action which would view all processes of optimalization as taking either ends or means as given and not varying both simultaneously. A further consideration of these analogies would probably lead to the conclusion that evolutionarily important factors underlie the relation among the interpretation of time, the rationalization of action, and the social institutionalization of exchange. As "evolutionary constraints," they would make an increase in complexity dependent upon restructuring processes in all three areas.

9. Willms (1969) interprets this "immanentization of the future" as a historical feat of the bourgeois subject. But the bourgeois subject is not an isolated agent. It is bourgeois only as a symbol of the primacy of economics in society, and it is a subject only as a symbol of the individual's external position in a fully functionally differentiated society.

10. It is interesting that as a matter of course economic theory has focussed on this cognitive attitude toward expectations. For a summary, see

Machinek (1968). In the broader perspective of sociology, in contrast, it becomes a problem under what conditions a social system can thus specialize one-sidedly in cognitive expectations while foregoing forms of moral security.

11. In particular, comparisons with developing countries can demonstrate that our customary way of communication in economic transactions is a cultural accomplishment with many presuppositions and is not identical with the formation of markets. Cf. Riggs (1961, pp. 130ff.; 1964, pp. 108ff.).

12. In a similar way (though the details are somewhat different), Parsons begins his analysis of money with the differentiation of the action system into functionally specific subsystems and with a concept of "generalized media of interchange" based on linguistic theory. See Parsons (1963). For a sociological theory of money see also Heinemann (1969).

13. Here a remark about the connections among time, freedom, and the economy is appropriate. In addition to its social and political dimensions, freedom also has a temporal dimension. Thus, in antiquity time was defined as leisure which rested upon general social status. Once increasing functional differentiation began to break apart generalized status positions which spanned all the functional realms of society, freedom had to be conceived as an "original," pre-social good. The temporal aspect of freedom shifted to the economy. Freedom came to depend on the actual possession of money, and politically constituted law was conceived as a condition for the maximization of freedom. There thus emerged surprising analogies between law and money: while the former worked as a static principle for the maximization of freedom, the latter worked as a dynamic principle for the same end, and both ensured that action (as a reduction of complexity) would not lead to a loss of freedom (i.e., complexity available in the future).

14. Ferber (1969) shows that these preconditions for learning disappear with the bureaucratically administered distribution of money and must be replaced by other ones (e.g. empirical criteria of success).

15. Transcendental epistemology typically assumed that reflection could be iterated indefinitely. In spite of earlier remarks by Descartes, it did not see any problem arising from the finitude of actual consciousness, but only a logical problem having to do with infinity. See Frey (1965), who has traced analogies between this mistake (obvious from the viewpoint of empirical science) and modern linguistics.

16. It was typical both of Kelsen's pure theory of law and, in a different way, of "moral" theories of law to pose the question about the nature of the creation of norms in hierarchical structures as one having to do with a "fundamental norm" (*Grundnorm*), and not as one having to do with the function of normative expectations.

17. Characteristic of the classical theory of power was its inability to deal with this question. It could use neither a hierarchical model nor a

model of the separation of powers in order to describe the different degrees of influence of the social environment on the political system. That is because its concept of power ruled out the idea that higher power is exposed to stronger influences. Cf. Luhmann (1969a).

18. Characteristic of the classical theory of money was that, in looking for a sound basis for the value of money, it viewed money in terms of its exchangeability for real values—without realizing that the essential function of money is to ensure that these processes can be disturbed in a differentiated way. See below.

19. The planned dismantling of class and legal barriers and the opening up of all economic goods, even landed property, to the market played an important role in intentionally bringing about this situation. An equally important factor is easily overlooked. The separation of work from a general and not specifically economic institution—the household—led to work's costing money. That in turn undermined the traditional self-sufficiency of single economic goods, and indeed of landed property, since now no good could be utilized or even obtained independently of the mechanism of money. Whoever earns nothing can no longer afford landed property.

20. For the significance of trust in this connection (namely, the significance of a reflexive trust in trust), see Luhmann (1968a). Cf. Heinemann (1969, p. 83f.).

21. This need not always be so. As can be seen in the case of the family, there are other, functionally equivalent strategies for reacting to external differentiation. Thus, the advantages stemming from the differentiation of society into distinct functional domains does not imply that the present internal differentiation of the economy into markets, firms, and households will continue to last. In other words, it does not imply that by means of a theory of social evolution we can justify the present structure of our economy as the best possible form.

22. Thus, criticisms and attempts to alter this internal differentiation had from the beginning to follow a *political* path. To use our terminology, they had available the good argument that the external differentiation of the economy did not at all lead to the neutralization of its political consequences. Instead, studies of the outcome of the distribution processes based on this economic structure showed correlations that could become, and for socialist critics, ought to become, a political problem.

23. Characteristic of this situation are recent tendencies, in the theory of entrepreneurial firms, to give up the fiction of perfectly competitive markets, to analyze the resulting set of extra-market problems as problems for the firms themselves, and to subordinate structural questions to this perspective (i.e., to view organization as a means for allowing the most rational decisions possible).

24. Naturally, this does not exclude the possibility of finding (with a change in system reference) a political opposition between these terms. Indeed, such a restructuring would become politically relevant whenever,

for example, it had consequences that altered the society outside the economic system. But even then political analysis would presuppose an economic analysis, since the scope of the restructuring would have to be understood.

25. Elsewhere—Luhmann (1966a)—in order to bracket decisions about organization and personnel, I conceived of a more narrow planning as the definition of a problem and the determination of the conditions for its solution.

26. For example, the schedules for public transportation can be observed only if the travelers know their roles and not if the roles must be taught or negotiated. Cf. Katz and Eisenstadt (1960). In this regard the example mentioned above of our practice of deciding whether to buy or not in accordance with fixed prices should be recalled.

27. This is harshly formulated. Naturally, there are sociologists whose work is socially *engagé* and who directly adopt the perspective of members of society. And there are also quasi-sociologies, e.g. Marxism, which use a sociologically enlightened language for their "critique," but not for their "perspective."

28. The much discussed problem of how the whole can be greater then the sum of its parts is thus wrongly posed. The problem is rather how the whole can be less than the sum of its parts. See Luhmann (1970b).

29. This has been seen by Ramsöy (1963): "a leadership subsystem (a member for an inclusive system) is often, in contradiction to Russell's Theory of Logical Types, empirically treated as if it were the inclusive system" (p. 191).

30. Even someone who believed that certain kinds of subsystems are "more indispensable" than others—perhaps in terms of their ability to outlast regressive developments of society—would not arrive at a satisfactory theory. He would ultimately end up with the most indispensable system of all—the family: he would have to accord this system a functional primacy constant throughout the course of social evolution, thus closing himself off from an adequate concept of social evolution as well as of modern society. It is all the more unsatisfactory to answer the question of primacy by assigning places (in a logically reversible way) in the superstructure or base.

10. The Differentiation of Society

1. Sir Geoffrey Vickers, for example, takes ecosystems to be "supersystems" that guide the choice of system/environment references within themselves. See his introduction to Emery and Trist (1973, p. vii). For critical remarks, see Buck (1956, pp. 234ff.).

2. A typical example can be found in Ackoff and Emery (1972, p. 18):

"System: a set of interrelated elements, each of which is related directly or indirectly to every other element, and no subset of which is unrelated to any other subset." Obviously enough, this ignores the existence of relations between systems and environments.

3. I refer to Ashby (1952; 1956) and to the foundations of the Parsonian conceptual scheme as stated in Parsons (1970, pp. 30ff.).

4. Of course, I do not want to deny that actors can pick up prepared meanings and that individual links in "selection chains" have to be attributed to them. But even this depends on processes of attribution that cannot be completely controlled by the actor alone.

5. Our knowledge of cosmological conceptions through the "history of ideas" strongly suggests the need for further research. So far, however, accompanying changes in the social system of the society have not been convincingly explored. Cf. Duhem (1913–1959); McColley (1936); Mugler (1953); Koyré (1957); Kranz (1958); Orban (1970). Further research will depend on breaking up the overly compact notion of "increasing differentiation" by distinguishing different *forms* of differentiation. We shall also have to find ways to evaluate the contribution of specialized subsystems (for example, theology) in a society which, on the whole, is not yet highly differentiated.

6. Compare the distinction between pyramidal and hierarchical structure in Southall (1956).

7. The conceptual scheme meant to perform this function consisted of three dichotomies that tended to merge: whole/parts, higher/lower, and ends/means (or, intrinsic/extrinsic ends). They were introduced in Aristotle's *Politics*. An impressive attempt to formulate their coherence in the general framework of a religious cosmology is offered by Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1, q. 65 a.2 (1952, p. 318).

The simple congruence of these dichotomies (in the sense of whole = higher = end and parts = lower = means) was of no use, of course, in practical affairs. The parts themselves had to be differentiated into higher and lower elements with different affinities to the whole. This is the context referred to in the classical notions of rulership (or domination), representation, and participation. Although it retained these terms, the bourgeois revolution destroyed their context. Thus, it promulgated the idea of solving problems by maximizing either domination or representation or participation.

8. One famous statement is found in Tocqueville (1952–53). It would be interesting, also, to analyze the system of ancient China as a counterexample. The Chinese apparently managed to use the subsystem of education for the dual function of absorbing the wealthy into the existing status system and dethematizing social complexity by the classical "topics" of education. Cf. Ho (1960).

9. These conditions were drastically changed by the modern technology of mass communication. The invention of printing had an immediate and

important impact on religious movements, peasant revolts, and urban uprisings in the first half of the sixteenth century. Not only did it speed up and interconnect the movements themselves, but it also intensified upper class communication by new and traditional channels (Eisenstein, 1971; Rammstedt, 1975). Today, members of the higher strata have to be informed people, and this means that they have to know (or at least feign to know) events immediately after they are made public.

10. We must recognize, however, that classical conceptions of society did use a conceptual technique that can be described as a reprojection of functional primacies on the level of the encompassing system of society. Formulae like "*civitas sive societas civilis*" (stemming from Aristotle, *Politica* 1252a), "*corpus Christi*" and "*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*" reveal such reprojection, using as their basis the political, the religious, and the economic subsystems, respectively. These formulae have to be understood in the framework of a tradition that elaborated differentiation in terms of wholes and parts and was compelled to use *pars pro toto* arguments (see note 7).

11. The fact that scientific conceptualizations also join in using such dichotomies, however, is hard to justify. Compare Apter (1971, p. 13) as one example among many.

12. A good statement is Koselleck (1967; 1968). Compare also Poulet (1949); as well as selections 12 and 13 of this volume.

13. This requires the production of both true and false propositions. In fact, the decision that a proposition is false occurs more often, at least in the social sciences, and has even been proclaimed as the methodological guideline of science.

14. Hegel underlines this change in his *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (1955, §§36, 209).

15. Comparing Chinese and European civilization, Benjamin Nelson draws attention to the fact that, despite an equal degree of economic and technological development, the emergence of universalistic conceptualizations prepared the way for modern society in medieval Europe, but not in other high cultures. Cf. Nelson (1974).

16. It will be of no avail to distinguish between general and specific evolution and to limit empirical research, using Guttman scales, to the evolution of special institutions or subsystems. Examples are: Swanson (1960); Schwartz and Miller (1964); Abrahamson (1968); and Farrell (1969). Compare also Freeman and Winch (1957); Caneiro and Tobias (1963); Leik and Mathews (1968); Buck and Jacobson (1968); and Bergmann (1973). As a critique of the application of this approach to problems of social change see Smith (1973; esp. pp. 43ff., 137ff.). The restriction of a theory to sequential change of specific institutions makes it easier to arrange empirical evidence in support of the theory, but it makes it more difficult to explain change.

17. The reconstruction of past history in terms of a linear sequence of

actions, events, or stages has, nevertheless, its own function. It reinforces the identity of a changing system—in our case, the identity of bourgeois society in its transition from stratification to functional differentiation. It will, however, be difficult to attain sufficient *scientific* support for functions which refer to the encompassing *society* (which includes science as one of its subsystems).

18. Compare Fairbank (1968) documenting the conscious differentiation of civilized (internal) and barbarian (external) order and the strong cultural component of tributary relations and attitudes toward foreign merchants. See also Lattimore (1951; 1962).

19. For the beginnings of the European idea of frontiers, see Lemarignier (1945) and Dion (1947).

20. In the European Middle Ages, particularly in France, the *religious* system initiated a movement toward clearly defined territorial boundaries, which was taken over only with hesitation by the political powers. This, however, is an interesting exception, due to the legalistic and organizational structure of the church, which created decision-making problems of its own (concerning, for example, the competencies of bishops who traveled *extra provinciam*).

21. For a formulation of the problem see Graicunas (1937) and Kephart (1945).

22. This is also true (for reasons of time) between systems and environments, as Ashby (1956) has shown.

23. It will be impossible to decide if these are independent or dependent variables. Evidently, they are both. For an extensive discussion of this question, see Boserup (1965); Dumond (1965); Caneiro (1967); Spooner (1972); and Boserup (1974). The theoretically fruitful distinction, however, is between *external* and *internal* (and not independent and dependent) variables. External variables, too, may depend on system structures and forms of differentiation.

24. For references, see note 12.

25. See Galtung (1970) for some empirical evidence.

26. The concept of "expectation" is used by Parsons and others to connect structural and motivational aspects in the general framework of a theory of action systems. Cf. Parsons and Shils (1951); Parsons (1951); and Foschi (1972).

27. Lockwood's (1964) distinction can be accepted only with important modifications. It will have to include the case of negative integration because denial is also a way of integrating communication about the same topic.

28. This cleavage has, of course, an old tradition. It was not invented in the nineteenth century, but it was reformulated then. It originated from the attempts of early Greek "philosophers" to replace the epic-poetic way of preserved communication and rhapsodic education by a distinction between knowing persons and known objects and by means of the ontological

focus on invariant structures of "being as such." See, for this structural change of communication techniques and language patterns, Havelock (1963).

29. It is certainly an open question, but an interesting one to explore further, whether after Hegel and Marx (and after Parsons), a more opportunistic or pragmatic approach to problems of theory design may be advisable. Bershady (1973) comes to a similar conclusion. See selection II.

30. In the theory of organic evolution, these mechanisms have been identified as (1) mutation and genetic recombination, (2) natural selection, and (3) reproductive isolation of populations. They are clearly differentiated by different *types* of system formation. The application of this general framework to problems of sociocultural evolution would require an identification of these mechanisms and an explanation of their differentiation. It has never been attempted. The reference to the struggle for existence or competition as an explanatory principle is, of course, no adequate solution.

31. The so-called neo-evolutionist movement within structural-functional theory did not quite grasp this change of paradigm, limiting itself to a criticism of special assumptions about development like necessity, unilinearity, continuity, and irreversibility. After having dismissed all this, we can hardly retain the notion of evolution as a process. We then have to reformulate the conceptual foundations of the theory of evolution.

32. Good illustrations concerning the internal differentiation of the protocapitalistic European economic system can be found in Wallerstein (1974).

11. Systems Theory, Evolutionary Theory, and Communication Theory

1. The idea of "double contingency" is elucidated in Parsons and Shils (1951a, p. 16).

2. For a discussion of some of the defects of this Parsonian conception, see Smith (1973).

3. See, as a parallel construction in theology, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I q. 65 a. 2: ". . . quod ex omnibus creaturis constitutur totum universum sicut totum ex partibus. . . . Sic igitur et in partibus universi, unaquaeque creatura est propter suum proprium actum et perfectionem. Secundae autem creaturae ignobiliores sunt propter nobiliores sicut creaturae quae sunt infra hominem, sunt propter hominem. Ulterius autem, singulae creaturae sunt propter perfectionem totius universi. Ulterius autem, totum universum, cum singulis suis partibus, ordinatur in Deum sicut in finem, inquantum in eis per quandam imitationem divina bonitas repraesentatur ad gloriam Dei . . ." [". . . the entire universe consists of all

creatures, just as a whole consists of parts. . . . so, therefore, in the parts of the universe too, every creature exists for the sake of its own proper act and perfection; and the less noble for the more noble, just as those creatures less noble than man exist for the sake of man; and every single creature exists for the perfection of the whole universe. Furthermore, the whole universe, with all its individual parts, is ordered in God as toward its goal, insofar as it imitates, as it were, the divine goodness, for the glory of God . . ."] Here relations are interpreted as purposes (i.e., as closely associated with action), while relations between subsystems are construed as hierarchies in the service of "the other" (God). Self-reference incorporates the lowest level and the *imitatio* of God's goodness prevents the self-reflection of the whole from being thrown into question.

4. A comprehensive inventory of this conceptual transformation is being attempted in the historical dictionary edited by Brunner, et al (1972).

5. Any attempt to bridge theory relativism through a priori premises would be forced into employing very problematic techniques of generalization. We can study this development, for example, in Parsons' theory. For a critical analysis of Parsons, see Bershady (1973). Renouncing such generalization techniques, however, means giving up the automatic translatability of all other theory languages into one's own. This renunciation, in fact, can be justified by the distinction between ordinary language and the various media of communication. Translatability is a structural requirement of language but not a requirement of the communication medium "truth."

6. On this point, see Leibniz (1903, p. 408): "Verum est vel necessarium vel contingens. Verum necessarium sciri potest per finitam seriem substitutionum seu per coincidentia commensurabilia, verum contingens per infinitam seu per coincidentia incommensurabilia." ["What is true is either necessarily true or contingently true. What is necessarily true can be known through a finite series of substitutions or through a coincidence of commensurables. Contingent truths can be known through an infinite series of substitutions or through a coincidence of incommensurables."] Commensurability, incidentally, is equivalent to the translatability of a theory language (cf. note 5). Whoever pursues this translatability in Parsons' sense, must eventually renounce the knowledge of contingent truths and must thus also abjure a theory of evolution.

12. The Future Cannot Begin

1. For Neo-Platonic origins, see the texts edited by Sambursky and Pines (1971). See also Sorokin (1937, 2: 473ff.).

2. This was, to be sure, only one of the traditional notions of negation (the discussion of different ideas of negation was extremely complex in

late medieval and early modern times). But its abolition nevertheless necessitated the reconstruction of the meaning of negation as such.

3. Grégoire (1798, pp. 552–56). The future is perceived, in this political context at least, as close at hand (*prochainement!*). Actually, neither the word *avenir* nor the phrase *Le temps present est gros d'avenir* were invented during the French Revolution. The phrase serves as motto to Louis Sébastien Mercier's book *l'An deux mille quatre cent quarante: Rêve s'il en fut jamais* (1772). Mercier refers to Leibniz. Checking Leibniz, we discover a characteristic difference. He does not speak about "the present time" but only about the present as such and uses the phrase only to show that monads have a temporal dimension. For example, *Essais de Theodicée* § 360: "C'est une des règles de mon système de l'harmonie que le présent est gros de l'avenir" (Leibniz 1885, 6: p. 329). Or *Principes de la Nature et de la Grace, fondées en raison* § 13 (*ibid.*, p. 604): "Le présent est gros de l'avenir, le futur se pouvoit lire dans le passé, l'éloigné est exprimé dans le prochain." Or *Letter to Bayle*, without date (*ibid.*, 3:66): "Le présent est toujours gros de l'avenir ou chaque substance doit exprimer des à present tous ses estats futurs." Thus, for Leibniz, there is no open future! Or *Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement* (*ibid.*, 5:48): "Le présent est gros de l'avenir et chargé du passé."

4. On the psychological level we have some evidence for this dual understanding of the present: it seems to be either a very brief instant or a rather long duration. See Cottle and Klineberg (1974, p. 108).

5. In fact, a new *Wörterbuch Geschichtlicher Grundbegriffe* which began to appear in Germany in 1972 tries to make this point.

6. See, for example, the much discussed distinction of the linear dimension and the modalities of time by McTaggart (1908, pp. 457–74). For the historical tradition of the German *Geisteswissenschaften*, see Heidegger (1916).

7 The primary function of primitive time reckoning seems to be the integration of recurrent ecological changes and social norms regulating behavior. Cf. Maltz (1968).

8. This does not mean that the present can be explained by its function. There is always the primordial fact of a "specious present" relating time to reality. Following Mead (1932, p. 88), therefore, we must distinguish the functional present from the specious present. A present without a function (i.e., without a context) is, by that very fact, reduced to a specious present.

9. Aristotle, *Physics*, Book VI, 236a.

10. See the chapter *De incipit et desinit* of the *Regule Solvendi Sophismata* of William Heytesbury (Fourteenth Century) in Wilson (1956, pp. 29ff.).

11. See again William Heytesbury in Wilson (1956).

12. There are close parallels here to the difficulties Kant ran into by equalizing the three (!) modalities of necessity, possibility, and actuality

(substituting this for the traditional pairs of *necessarium/contingens* and *possible/impossible*) as different modes of cognition. The problem consists in the differentiation of completely conditioned possibility and actuality. Cf. Pape (1966, 1:224ff.). See also Hartmann (1949, esp pp. 223ff.). Kant could not conceive that the possible could become actual by the addition of something, because whatever was added would then have to be something which is not possible (*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B. pp. 283ff.). For similar reasons, we feel unable to think of the future as beginning to become the present.

13. For the notion of horizon, see Husserl (1950, pp. 48ff., 10ff., 199ff.; 1948; 1959, pp. 146ff.; 1966, pp. 3ff.). George Herbert Mead (1932, p. 26) lights upon this metaphor without mentioning Husserl: "There is nothing transcendent about this powerlessness of our minds to exhaust any situation. Any advance which makes toward greater knowledge simply extends the horizon of experience; but all remains within conceivable experience."

14. For further elaboration, see selection 13.

15. This, of course, is one of the central ideas of George Herbert Mead. Mead himself uses the formulation "past pasts," referring to the pasts of past presents (1932, p. 7).

16. For the medieval discussion of "future contingents" and its importance for church policy, see Thomas Aquinas, in *I. Peri Hermeneias* lect. XIII, XIV; *Quaestiones disputatae de Veritate* q. II, art. 12; *Summa Theologiae* I q. 14 art. 13; William of Occam (1945); Baudry (1950).

17. Ackoff and Emery (1972, esp pp. 30ff.), pursue a similar intention by distinguishing between goal seeking and purposeful systems.

18. In one important sense this reference to "utopias" is misleading because originally the literary device of a utopia was invented just because critics were *not* able to use their society's future as a projection screen. The turning point can be dated exactly: in 1768 Mercier began to write his *l'An deux mille quatre cent quarante*.

19. A comprehensive presentation of such imaginary approaches to the future is Polak (1961). However, it does not pay enough attention to the historical variability of time itself. Cf. also Bell and Mau (1971).

20. A harsh criticism of the technocratic conception of time has been formulated by Reid (1972; 1973).

21. This, of course, is what Habermas has in mind when he "unmasks" the uses of technology and systems theory as ideology. Cf. Habermas (1968); and Luhmann and Habermas (1971). See also Boguslaw (1965); Bensman and Lilienfeld (1973, pp. 282ff.); Lilienfeld (1975).

22. For a classical statement, see Tocqueville (1952–53).

23. For the function of "security bases" in relation to generalized media of communication, see the essays on "power" and "influence" in Parsons (1967, pp. 297–354, 355–82). Furthermore, Luhmann (1974e).

24. A well known statement is found in Antoine de Condorcet's *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (1794). For the

continuing impact of this idea and for empirical correlations between an emphasis on the future and an emphasis on equality, see Mau (1968). Since equality implies freedom and freedom implies inequality, the postulate of equality cannot refer to reality, *but only to time.* Its only function is to deny the relevance of the past—for instance, the relevance of biographies and ascribed status for access to education (equality of opportunity) or to political suffrage.

13. World-Time and System History

1. Despite their great distance from reliable historical research see Eisenstadt (1963) and Parsons (1966a) and (1971).

2. This comparison can also serve to remind us of the unsolved logical problems concerning this kind of simultaneity between two temporal levels. Cf. Prior (1968, pp. 26–44).

3. Schmidt (1971) rightly points out that the idea of historical consciousness cannot be given up by a Marxist theory of society.

4. For a critical discussion of this conceptual opposition between experience and action, cf. Luhmann and Habermas (1971, p. 75f., 202f., 305f.). Michael Theunissen has objected (in conversation) that the experiencing of one's experiences is also something consciousness attributes to itself. That is true if we are identifying the conscious self as the "subject" of experience. But we must distinguish that from the question of what the selection involved is attributed to. I would deny that the self could attribute that selection to itself without thinking of itself as an *agent.* Whoever experiences himself as someone who is making (or typically, has made) a choice, experiences himself as acting. The complications arising through self-reflexivity can only be mastered by a conceptual framework which can apply the simple categories of experience and action to each other, allowing us to speak of the experiencing of experience, the experiencing of action, and reacting to experience.

5. This is how the logical analysis of temporal propositions proceeds. See e.g., Prior (1957; 1967; 1968); Rescher (1967) and (1968a, p. 196f.) and the further references given there. And this is just how a certain historian proceeds, who defines history as "the spiritual form in which a culture accounts for its past." See Huizinga (1930, p. 86).

6. I suspect that this is connected with the original logical and ontological conception of the problem of modality and with the later epistemological cast given to that conception. Cf. Barth (1966, 1:332f.).

7. Originally the concept of generalization came from behavioristic psychology and meant just this function of organized indifference and selective reactions to an overflow of distinctions in the environment. See, e.g., Hull (1943, p. 183f.) and Stendenbach (1963, p. 90f.). For the extension of

this concept beyond psychology and its application even to the case of compatibility with a number of system-states, see Parsons, et al. (1953, pp. 41f.,81).

8. In the tradition of modal theory the difference between these types has frequently been overlooked. The most important example is the discussion about future contingents beginning with *De Interpretatione* 9. There the problem was defined by a combination of *temporal* and *logical* modalities. Then, at first for theological and scientific reasons, thinkers from Anselm to Hobbes solved the problem by means of epistemic modalities (namely, by appeal to the inadequacy of human knowledge). Less well-known is the corresponding confusion in the scholastic concept of generalization, or *ampliatio,* which spanned not only extensions of time but also increases in what is possible. See, e.g., Mullally (1945, p. 38f.) and Delgado (1964, p. 238f.). Even today we are still far from having clarified the differences and interconnections between logical and temporal modalities. Among other things, we must think about the fact (and this seems to justify *ex post* the concept of *ampliatio*) that modal possibilities are used to constitute the temporal continuity of the experiential world—namely, for the "filling in of gaps in actual experience with a fabric of possibles." See, Goodman (1965, p. 50). Hence, it can be no accident that medieval and early modern difficulties in modal theory, which led to its reduction to epistemology, coincide with difficulties in understanding temporal continuity. Cf. Pape (1966), Poulet (1954), and Rescher (1968b, p. 256f.).

9. This priority given to the possible over the necessary already appears in the famous chapters 12 and 13 of *De Interpretatione*. But, as a condition of God's freedom, it was made absolute in the medieval theory of creation and used to explode the cosmological conception of the world, with the thesis "quod contingentia non est tantum privatio vel defectus entitatis (sicut est deformitas in actu illo qui est peccatum), immo contingentia est modus positivus entis (sicut necessitas est alius modus), et esse positivum—quod est in effectu—principalius est a causa priore." (Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio* I. dist. 39 ad arg. pro tertia opinione). See Duns Scotus (1950, 6:444). To this extent, the theory of creation was a direct predecessor of the theory of evolution.

10. See Wolff (1961, pp. 1–90). That this is not only a requirement of social and historical analysis, but can also be, for example, a requirement for political understanding and legitimation is shown by Aeschylus' *Eumenides*.

11. The epistemological version of the problem that we find in Kant was already a generalization of older questions from modal theory; it was a consequence of the fact that the question now focused not simply on *what is possible* but on *possibility,* and thus on the conceptual possibility of this concept of possibility. On this, see Pape (1966, p. 216f.). With this doubly modalized form of the question (see section V) Kant came upon

the question of the conditions of possibility for possibility, posing it no longer theologically but epistemologically as the question of the conditions under which knowledge can operate with modal categories.

12. This is how the Marxist theory of system evolution proceeds, with its important references to the historical relativity of the difference between what is possible and what is impossible. See Pawelzig (1970, p. 197f.).

13. This is clearly the case among the Chinese Legists. See the introduction in Duyvendak (1928) and for more details, Vandermeersch (1965). The secondary literature on the European concept of nature does not, as a rule, consider its political and economic context. But it can allow us to reconstruct this context when we look at the relation between the economy and politics in the Greek polis. For the concept of nature in relation to society, see Beardslee (1918); Blumenberg (1957); Ritter (1961); Schmidt (1962); Post (1964, p. 494f.); *La Filosofia della natura nel Medioevo* (1966); Nobis (1967).

14. This corresponds to the demand that the concept of information as well as the concept of consciousness should be functionally related to the problem of selection. For the concept of information, see MacKay (1969). For the psychology of consciousness, this idea can be traced back at least as far as William James, and since then it can especially be found in research on attention. For a general formulation that would not repudiate falling back on the framework of transcendental idealism, see Günther (1966).

15. An interesting example of the differentiation between the universal history of society and the special history of one of its systems (a clan or an individual) can be found in Cunnison (1951). It is also interesting because reporting and interpreting the system-history, a momentous and precarious affair, is reserved to the holders of status positions in the system. For similar results about a case which displays a less intense orientation toward history, see Bohannan (1953). For parallel forms of differentiation in the religious world-picture of archaic societies, cf. Horton (1962) and Middleton (1960, p. 235f.).

16. It can be demonstrated that in social systems such as trials, legal procedures, and all sorts of investigations, the history of the system begins by partially neutralizing the history of its environment or "world" and then setting out to reconstruct it. It is precisely then that the choices underlying the system-history must be made particularly binding, and their basis made understandable and visible, since they are related to a "world" history which is open, doubtful, or controversial. Here the system-history must serve as a basis of security for "world" history. See Cicourel (1969, p. 328f.).

17. One good example is the latitude a person may take with his own biography when he is in a bar. See Cavan (1966, p. 54f.). This example

also shows that the liberties taken with "world" history depend among other things upon whether the system has a future in the world that could pose unforeseeable demands on its consistency and compatibility. Cf. Bittner (1967).

18. The problem becomes more difficult when functional equivalents for history—like law, programs, and leadership—fall by the wayside. The consequences can be observed in numerous university committees.

19. Similarly, material differentiation (variety) as the condition of possibility for movement was thought even in antiquity to mean that world and time are simultaneous. Underlying this conclusion, however, was not the concept of selection, but the concept of movement, and the world to which it applied was understood as a finitely ordered aggregate. Cf. Aristotle, *Physics* IV.14; Augustine, *Confessions* XII.8.

20. One indication of this is that the linguistic means for representing time are tied to the verb and, in the course of cultural gains in abstraction, initially made use of spatial images. Cf., for example, Mbiti (1967).

21. One good example, which at the same time indicates the connection with the principle of *segmental* differentiation of society, is discussed by Evans-Pritchard (1939; 1940, p. 115f.).

22. Cf. Bohannan (1953); Mbiti (1967); Gubser (1965, p. 28f.); Middleton (1965, p. 18f.); Jenni (1953). A late form of this original conception of time, which lets past and future run together in an obscure zone, is the rationalized model of "the circle of time." The best-known account is Eliade (1953). Another rationalized form of the original conception is the idea of a double time, which was discussed in the Middle Ages with reference to *Timaeus* 37D-38C and Boethius' *Consolatio Philosophiae*. Eternity was then viewed not as temporally unlimited existence, but rather as a "presentarius status" simultaneous with all points in time; it was the basis on which God ruled the course of time. Cf. Duhem (1913–1959, esp. 7:303f.) and Parent (1938, p. 95f.). The circular theory and the multi-level theory were different ways of rationalizing the original feeling that an identity between future and past must momentarily exist. The future-oriented character of the multi-level theory lies in its no longer delimiting the course of time by a fixed before and after, but instead by the directing (and later "secularizable") will of God.

23. This is not yet a causal hypothesis, for the historical causes of this development must be rather complex. For example, the development of Mesopotamia took place through a number of cities. It was politically tumultuous and thus could not lead to a single, unified hierarchy for religious, economic, military, and political functions.

24. An excellent work on this is David (1949). See also Gunnell (1968, p. 39f.). The sharp contrast drawn between Egyptian and Mesopotamian culture needs examination, since Egypt, too, witnessed a certain distance between the supreme divinity and the ruler, an ethicalization of religion,

a problematization of truth and justice (Maat), a concern with theodicy, as well as the beginnings of a historical orientation toward time (both cyclical and linear). On this see Morenz (1960). The evolutionary hypothesis that there is a connection between contingency and time is confirmed rather than weakened by these facts.

25. Moreover, a second connection between the social and temporal dimensions must be considered, as in Marsh (1952): the popular unity of Israel in a hostile environment was so strongly experienced that this totality rubbed off on time, holding together the temporal horizons of past and future in the present.

26. One example would be the construction of a special concept of truth over and above the immediate experience of the world. Another would be the construction of a concept of law and of the idea of valid norms over and above immediately experienced and occasionally disappointed normative expectations.

27. In the history of conceptions of time, this requirement was expressed by the idea that time is no longer to be equated with movement, but with the measure of movement. About the same time, legal norms were subjected to the criterion of justice and experiential knowledge was subjected to a bivalent concept of truth.

28. The parallels in the development of psychological systems have been investigated by Piaget (1955). *Today*, of course, psychological development can rely on available and teachable cultural patterns and mechanisms, visible in the behavior of others—for example, clocks. To that extent, it is dependent on the present stage of social evolution.

29. A good example of the implausibility of such reversibility can be seen in the slow and difficult switch from the assignment of dates beginning with the creation of the world to the assignment of dates from Christ's birth backward into the past. This technique was definitively instituted, against the Biblical view of history, only in the eighteenth century—and not for theological reasons, but rather for reasons of precision and certainty. Cf. Klempt (1960) and Wittram (1963, pp. 123ff.).

30. The widespread belief that the ancient Hebrews had a linear conception of time needs to be reconsidered for sociological reasons. See the reservations in Gunnell (1968, p. 63f.). These doubts do not question the existence of spatial analogies for time; these were already present in ancient Egypt. See Morenz (1960, pp. 79ff.). Instead, they question the Hebrews' ability to abstract from the present as well as the thesis that they had only one conception of time. For a critique of these views, which are particularly advocated by theologians, see Barr (1962), Momigliano (1966), and Seckler (1964, pp. 151ff.). Equally problematic and incomplete is the view that, in contrast, the Greeks had only a cyclical conception of time. See Momigliano (1966) and Vidal-Naquet (1960).

31. This does not explain what "simultaneity" really means. Obviously,

dating provides only a technical substitute for an understanding of this idea. Both the traditional theological treatment of this problem and the treatment we find in Kierkegaard, Bergson, and Schütz indicate that this concept can be worked out only along the social dimension of experience. It must be construed in terms of communicative understanding. For just this reason the problem at hand lies not so much in the simultaneity of events, as in the simultaneity of selective processes, which themselves require time.

32. "The longer the time perspective, and the broader the system involved, the greater is the relative importance of higher, rather than lower, factors in the control hierarchy, regardless of whether it is pattern maintenance or pattern change that requires explanation" Parsons (1966a, p. 113). This hypothesis does not rest on any detailed analysis of the temporal dimension, but instead on the idea that there is an increasing differentiation between (relatively short-term) social systems and (relatively long-term) cultural systems.

33. This constitutes one of the most important ways of limiting possibilities. Anyone with the idea of making Catherine the Great a marriage proposal would find in present-day Leningrad hardly any complementary experience or action.

34. This, too, naturally has consequences for the level of abstraction that a theory of time requires. In this regard see Prior (1968) on "changes of changes." For the consequences in historical materialism, see Pawelzig lop1970, p. 46ff.).

35. As one example among many, see Philippe (1952, p. 36).

36. Cf. Hudson's (1966) distinction in ethnology between "ethnohistory" (historical research about primitive societies) and "folk history" (a present belief system), and Evans-Pritchard (1963, p. 51f.).

37. This also means breaking with all cyclical conceptions of time. In this regard, see Meyerson (1956, pp. 336ff.).

38. Nor can we understand it by discussing it, as historians usually do, in terms of some homogenized form of historical relativism which depends on unanalyzed conceptions of time.

39. The historical consciousness of the nineteenth century (which surely did not examine its assumptions about time) forms a *consequence* of this historicization of time without expressing it adequately. It replaced the older style of writing history whose aim was to present *examples* of human behavior, a style which assumed there was a moral continuum between past and present and thus did not tie down historical events (viewed as empirical confirmation for moral beliefs) to their position in history. See Nadel (1964).

40. If I have understood him correctly, Prior (1957, p. 10) and (1968, p. 8) chooses the opposite point of view. In order to make certain logical simplifications, he treats the present future as simultaneous with future

presents. Even Rescher (1968b), in discussing future contingents, treats "the *present* assertion of a future-oriented proposition . . . as amounting to a *future* assertion of a present-oriented proposition" (p. 214), *even though* obviously these are quite different kinds of assertion. This approach eliminates our problem of historicization.

41. Once again, a point of comparison with *Marxist* categories. See Schmidt (1971, pp. 13f., 65ff.).

42. This sequence can then be analyzed by the theory of social evolution as a means of increasing the complexity of society.

43. Hence, the original conception of tense had to be laboriously rediscovered. Cf. Weinrich (1971).

44. This development could be analyzed, following Kaufmann (1970), by appeal to specifically bourgeois "counter"-institutions such as "security." Direct connections between this development and political ideas can also be demonstrated, according to Willms (1970).

45. See, for example, Benveniste (1958).

46. Today it is both customary and superficial to claim that these symbols are only illusions or ideologies of the ruling class. To a certain extent that may be the case. But more significant is the fact that in bourgeois society problems of this complexity and abstractness were only able to receive such relatively simple institutional solutions, while today—in the face of still greater social complexity—the political realm, at least, seems to be dispensing with social reflexivity and a historical consciousness, in order to operate out of a more technically refined naïveté.

47. This can be illustrated with the idea of a "history of liberty." By this Oelmüller (1972) understands a history of incomplete freedom which is to be brought nearer to completion, that is a theory of progress. I would construe this idea rather in terms of a history of worn-out freedom whose continuance forces the present to learn with more abstract categories and which in this sense accumulates freedom as the awareness of contingency.

48. For a comparison with ideas of time in the later high cultures, see e.g. Smith (1952).

49. The most frequently discussed example is the biblical conception of history. For a comparative perspective, see Brandon (1965, p. 106ff.) and Gunnell (1968). For an explicit treatment of this problem, see Hempel (1953) and (1964, pp. 51ff.) as well as Cullmann (1965, p. 117f.). For the case of Greek historiography, see Châtelet (1962), who emphasizes the connection between the political constitution of society, the abolition of the archaic distinction between genealogical and mythical time, and the extended awareness of temporal continuity to longer chains of events and decisions.

50. Accame (1961) tries to show that for the Greeks this continuity was sought primarily in the relation between present and future (because of the collapse of Mycenean culture?), while for the Hebrews it was sought more in the relation between present and past. The later, oscillating eval-

uation of "memoria" and "curiositas" in Western culture may depend on this fact.

51. A good example is the biblical creation myth, whose political character becomes recognizable once we view it in hindsight (cf. Burke 1961, pp. 174ff.): Because one wants to punish, one needs there to be sin, and thus strategically placed negations, which will depend on something positive, namely creation. At the same time, by *morally* deriving the genesis of scarcity from the infraction of a norm, this myth also secures a moral control of economic behavior—which must have been indispensable in a society with a small economic potential. On this last point, see Foster (1965) and Röpke (1970, pp. 38ff.).

52. A good control experiment can be found in Bittner (1967), who maintains that in slums, where people are oriented toward extremely short stretches of time, there exists no principle of blame. See also the shrinkage of relevant time spans in the anomie experiments of McHugh (1968): "the tentative agnosticism of surprise leads to an emphasis on immediate arrangements in the environment, the *social* present, and out of this assessment comes a change in the meaning of events in the *chronological* past. Order, on the other hand, deemphasizes the chronological present in favor of the linkage of events through the social past and toward the future. During order, that is, events to be defined in the *chronological* present exist in the *social* (emergent) past and future. During disorder, the meaning that resides in the chronological past and future is discovered in the social (relative) present. It is a harlequin design that is less metaphorical than chronology, because it is closer to the actual rhythm of definition and its consequences" (p. 136f.).

53. The historical variability of the scarcity principle has been discussed especially in economic anthropology. For an overview of the discussion, see Röpke (1971). For the basis of the discussion, see Polanyi, et al. (1957). See also Foster (1965).

54. This seems to be because up until now interest has focused chiefly on criteria for deciding between truth and falsehood. See also Schnädelbach (1971), who recommends a return to Kant.

55. And this history will be to a large extent independent of its environment because of the autonomous code of love—just as in the case of legal hearings and investigations discussed above (note 16).

56. The basic theoretical idea is the thesis that system differentiation at the level of the whole society follows the differentiation of communications media. Cf. Luhmann (1976). A short sketch can be found in Luhmann and Habermas (1971, pp. 342ff.) and Luhmann (1947c).

57. This is the upshot of Selznick's (1957) thesis about the "institutionalization" of blanket formal organizations and the leadership problems they bring about. It should also be noted that the above analyses, being limited to the identification of roles and persons, do not give a complete picture of the historical weight of organized social systems. Equally nec-

essary would be an analysis of how values and programs are tied to history—as in the case of the "bug" for the Volkswagen Corporation or of "internal control" for the *Bundeswehr.*

58. Herein lies its technical superiority to the various types of primitive reciprocity. Cf. Sahlins (1965).

59. Counterexamples are not hard to find. See Philips (1961) and especially the contribution of R. C. Majumdar on "nationalist historians." But these counterexamples do not prove that the impact of underlying interests upon the categories and issues involved in such decisions cannot be significantly neutralized.

60. Here I am answering Mayntz's (1971) criticism that systems theory is ahistorical. This answer requires a systems-theoretic analysis of systems theory—a very form of reflexivity which Mayntz (p. 58) and Habermas (Luhmann and Habermas 1971, p. 221f.) consider an inadequate kind of justification.

14. The Self-Thematization of Society

1. For a criticism of attempts to locate reflection in an underlying "carrier," see Frey (1965, p. 15f.); Posthast (1971). In addition, there exists a close connection between such attempts and the *adaequatio* theory of truth to which we shall return below.

2. With this 1 answer Maciejewski's question about my concept of reflection (1972).

3. The use of this term [*Relationierung* in German] was suggested to me by Werner Loh's master's thesis (1972) and by his dissertation proposal elaborating the same idea. Loh calls the result of relating "form" and takes the regulation model of cybernetics as the context for discussing what a "relation" is.

4. Cf., with a view to elementary logical forms, Eley (1969; 1972).

5. In contrast to a widespread conception (especially notable in German idealism, but also found in French "contingentism" à la Boutroux), I do *not* mean "contingency" to refer to the limiting cases of fluke (in experience) and freedom (in action). Instead, reviving the medieval use of the word, I construe contingency precisely as the curtailment of such disorganized arbitrariness: as a prepatterned or structured access to other possibilities. *Order,* as a result, should not be viewed as the negation or suppression of contingency, but rather as a *reconstruction and systematic elaboration of contingency.*

6. On this point and on the evolutionary relation between these two criteria, see Luhmann (1973a).

7. On the interrelation between themes and horizons, see (elaborating

on the work of William James and Edmund Husserl) Gurwitsch (1957, pp. 246ff.); and Schutz (1970).

8. For artificial (and, to that extent, contingent) systems, see Simon (1969, pp. 9ff.).

9. See Luckmann (1970) for an elucidation of this concept. Cf. Luhmann (1972e), on the role of religion in the desocialization of nature and thus in the reorientation of society from naïve projections toward possibilities of reflection. The form of self-thematization dealt with here occurs in later phases of the evolutionary process. Hence, it presupposes, as an evolutionary achievement, the desocialization or "deprojectification" of society's relation to nature.

10. For further consideration of this point, see Luhmann (1966b). Most importantly, the distinction between (process) reflexivity and (system) reflection is meant to solve the problem of endless iteration: processes can thematize one another endlessly. For the theory of systems, by contrast, it makes no sense to go beyond the stage of thematizing self-thematization. Further self-reflective or self-reflexive stages would not lead to qualitative revisions.

11. Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 47, a. 1. God is hypostatized as the highest unity and *linked* with the multiplicity of worldly things through *intention*; Leibniz (1885, p. 603); and Marx (1961, p. 632), who conceived the hypostatized unity of the concrete as a self-abstraction of reality in its totality. See Lovejoy (1936), for a historical monograph on the subject and for further references.

12. Solutions to this problem can take various forms and the problem itself can be conceived in distinct ways; these are, however, secondary variations. There are, for instance, logical solutions—resting on the premise that the negation of a disvalue can be automatically equated with a value. Katkov (1937) is excellent on this point. There are also eschatological or historical-dialectical solutions. And finally, there are naïve solutions (for example, welfare).

13. This formulation is found in Kelsen (1923, p. 274). Even Kelsen's analysis suggests that this form of posing the question is based on a model provided by theology, i.e., on the presumed relation between God and the world. Further evidence for this interpretation lies in the fact that the impossibility of negating such hypostatizations is buttressed by the idea of "perfection"—a concept that had to be abandoned in the eighteenth century, however, and replaced with the concept of "development."

14. An exactly analogous argument was employed by Bossuet to demonstrate that we can never jettison our capacity for reflection, since this in turn could only be accomplished through reflection. Cf. Spaemann (1963, p. 126). I add here merely a refined distinction between reflexivity, negation, and reflection. For Bossuet, it followed from this argument that reflection compels the individual to understand himself in terms of "in-

terest." From my line of thought, by contrast, it merely follows that self-thematizations within system/environment relations are *contingent.*

15. On this point, and on the associated transformation, generalization, and taming of the world of the gods, see the excellent work by David (1949).

16. See, for instance, Gese (1958); and, in a wider theoretical framework, selection 13.

17. Hautē d'estin hē kaloumenē polis kai hē koinōnia hē politikē ["The so-called polis is the same as the political community."], so runs the famous formulation of Aristotle, handed down as *civitas sive societas civilis* (*Politics*, 1252^a, 6–7).

18. This thesis is disputed (especially by political scientists) with reference to the fact that politics is a lasting and indispensible element in any social order. Politics is said to "retain" its primacy in society even when it renounces the exercise of it (Dettling 1972, p. 61). Because of such objections, it should be once again made perfectly clear: "primacy" means neither functional indispensability (which numerous sectors of society can rightly claim) nor some kind of authority or domination (which would signal an unjustified fixation on politics). Instead, "primacy" means that the maintenance of the social differentiation between politics and economics depends on an answer to the question how far is it *politically* possible for politics to hold itself aloof from the fluctuation of economic events?

19. On this point, see selection 9.

20. I am referring to the distinction between collectivity and social system in Parsons and Smelser (1956, p. 15). Lessnoff (1968, p. 186) joined the debate here with a critique of Parsons' concept of society as a collectivity.

21. At this time, "natural freedom" referred to freedom given before the political constitution of society. The erroneous inference to a presocial, or even asocial or purely physical-organic freedom, was almost compulsory so long as society was narrowly understood as a "political community."

22. A succinct presentation of this orientation on the basis of economic-anthropological research is Röpke (1970, pp. 29ff., 1971).

23. Thus, we can continue using the medieval categories of "representation" and "participation" only in a very dubious manner, and they lose all connection with the problem of self-thematization being discussed here. On this point, see Rammstedt (1970); Luhmann (1972f, pp. 220ff.; and selection 13).

24. On this insight (going back to Spencer and Durkheim), cf. Parsons (1960, pp. 130ff.); Ackerman and Parsons (1966, pp. 36ff.).

25. We ought not inflict on Hegel a moralistic misunderstanding of his category *das Sittliche* ["the moral"], and of his concept of the State. Nevertheless, we may ask if he, with this category—and with his definition of "right" as freedom—was really aiming at a metamoral level of immunity

to negation from which the moral (or legal) disjunction could itself be judged as a "reconstruction of contingency." His concept of freedom, however, was an obstacle to his forming such an intention.

26. To speak more precisely: relations, which for any given society function as noncontingent, but which can nevertheless be handled as contingent.

27. For previous social theory, the function and basis of *Herrschaft* [authority and domination] lay in its capacity to overcome the logical difference between the whole and its parts. *Herrschaft* cancels this difference by projecting itself as a part (as the *maiores partes* or as the "party" or whatever) that takes the place of the whole. On the level of a general theory of social systems, this thought is explicitly formulated by Ramsöy (1963, p. 191f.).

28. One could also formulate the interpretation of transcendence as contingency.

29. As is well known, Husserl, after his turn to a transcendental phenomenology, took quite a different position. By attributing a transcendental character to subjective intentionality, he allowed the problem of intersubjectivity to become insoluble and the concept of constitution vague. See Schutz (1957); and Fink (1957, p. 334f.). This criticism, however, should not be allowed to conceal the enduring achievement of the phenomenological analysis of meaningful intentionality, namely, the discovery of the horizonal structure (worldliness) of all meaning. This discovery can be phenomenologically verified although (and precisely because) it cannot be falsified. We build on this discovery.

30. On this point, see MacKay (1964; 1969); for the elementary case of immediate face-to-face interaction, see Luhmann (1972a, p. 52f.).

31. Following Husserl, transcendental "egology" asks: "How can a constituting pure I and constituted real I be one and the same?" (Ingarden 1950, p. 213). Cf. also Asemissen (1959). The genetic way of posing the question (Can the presuppositions of the mutual constitution of meaning have existed *before* any meaning?) is without consequences for our argument, since we assume evolution to be a process of small steps, which, in its results, makes itself independent of its initial causes.

32. See, in addition, Luhmann (1971e, pp. 300ff.). Cf. Husserl's distinction (oriented to intended objects) between "inner horizons" and "outer horizons" (1948, pp. 26ff.); and Schutz (1970, pp. 31ff.).

33. Thus, it is ruled out that we might—with Maciejewski (1972, p. 141) and perhaps Habermas (?)—regard "abstract linguistic systems of rules for the generation of well-formed sentences" on anthropological grounds as a "single possible possibility," and give it precedence over the genesis of meaning. What Maciejewski means by "single possible possibility" remains unclear. In any case, *all* linguistic rules must have meaning: they must be situated on a horizon containing other possibilities, because otherwise they could never be applied—they could never (from case to case) be chosen as appropriate. The only question is how much they function

latently and to what extent they are formulated explicitly. This is also true for the rules according to which rules are chosen, because they too are applied only occasionally and not uninterruptedly. With this clarification, Maciejewski's polemic should lose much of its underpinning—at least so long as he does not provide a more precise account of his concept "the single possible possibility" and cannot explain away selection in the processing of experiences.

34. So say ethnomethodologists, who understand by "reflexivity" the fact that meaningful experience and action concurrently produce the definition and typification of situations, to which they relate themselves in a thematic and selective way. See Garfinkel (1967) and, for practical formulations made possible by this work, Garfinkel and Sachs (1970). The methodological problem of this insight of ethnomethodology, however, appears impossible to formulate. See, Churchill (1972, p. 185).

35. We cannot go into details here. Besides research in the theory of language and the beginnings of symbolic interactionism, Parsons' theory of pattern variables relates to this problem; so too does my distinction between cognitive and normative styles of expectation; and finally the theories of modality stemming from the philosophical tradition, that is, possibility theory and the theory of time. A conceptual integration of these distinct approaches is still lacking.

36. All attempts to assign societies either a linear or a cyclical conception of time have shipwrecked on this reef. Only highly complex modern societies seem to produce a highly abstract concept of time as a presupposition for coordinating dissociated subsystems.

37. A good example for this can be found in the political and religious history of the Hebrews, i.e., in the development of the idea of a *world*-God, Who directs both His chosen people and its enemies; Who does not, in other words, function merely as a part of one's own system. In this concept lay the chance (1) to see the environment as more highly differentiated and rife with conflicts, for instance, as an enemy which is simultaneously the tool of one's own God; (2) to expand one's temporal horizon in a worldwide way as universal history which includes a chain of highly diverse events; (3) to thematize the identity of one's own system in a more abstract way, i.e., on a level above the distinction between good and bad behavior and above fortunate and unfortunate events; (4) to ground on this basis an interior differentiation of the system into political control, established cult, and prophetic critique. And with all this came the chance to reach a more abstract level for the processing of contingencies in the environment and in one's own system.

38. The constitutional self-limitation of what had become the "sovereign" political system or State is a good illustration of this possibility. See Luhmann (1965 and 1973b).

39. The Chinese school of Legists offers perhaps the clearest example, and the most noteworthy one for its practical and political consequences.

A very instructive introduction can be found in Duyvendak (1928). Aristotle furnished the formulation of the Greek contrast between primitive household/village and political types of ethos (Ritter, 1969).

40. This is true, although today even Marxists must be explicitly reminded of the fact. Cf. Schmidt (1971).

41. This has been frequently noted. Cf. for instance, Gent (1926); Berger (1964, pp. 226ff.); and Kaufmann (1970, pp. 178ff.). Obviously, in rudimentary form *both* temporal horizons are relevant, otherwise there would be no consciousness of time. Only the breadth of continuity with the present varies, and with it the interest in orientation, exploration, and elaboration, and thus (in turn) the idea of time. As a consequence, it is pointless to criticize the above thesis by recalling ancient eschatologies or modern historicism. Eschatologies betray (insofar as they should be conceived as future-oriented and not simply as expressing a longing for the reestablishment of the past) a disinterest in the temporality of the future. And historicism is in many ways an expression of our society's interest in the future. On this point, see Löwith (1953, pp. 230ff.).

42. See Luhmann (1975a, pp. 170ff.). In Parsons' *Festschrift* (Loubser et al., 1976) there can also be found an introduction by Rainer Baum and a series of contributions on this topic. The following considerations underlie my understanding of the media of communication, which in essential respects deviates from Parsons' idea of the generalized media of interchange.

43. Attempts to elucidate the concept of an horizon have not yet been very successful. Cf. Kuhn (1940); Peursen (1945); Graumann (1960, pp. 60ff.).

44. See section I.

45. Other solutions involve concepts of similarity. For Leibniz, see Herring (1966).

46. See, for instance, Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 2nd ed., pp. 286f. (1901, p. 264) or the *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, sec. 76 (1902, pp. 278ff.). Cf. Christian Wolff's construction of the *Philosophia Prima sive Ontologia*, Pars. I, Section II (1962, pp. 62ff.), where in the first chapter is discussed *de possibili et impossibili*, in the second chapter *de determinato et indeterminato*. Only afterward, in the third chapter (*de notione entis*), do authentic discussions in modal theory occur.

47. "The world horizon is itself the future," as Eley formulates this point (1972, p. 326).

48. I consciously avoid the formulation "aggregation of all horizons," and thereby the misleading parallel with the traditional idea of a totality of things. The unity of the world is not the unity of an assemblage, *se ipsam et omnia continens*, but rather the unavoidable, indestructible possibility of moving from one thing to another—not an aggregation, but rather a correlation of meaningful experience and action.

49. See Habermas' remarks on my conception of truth—Luhmann and Habermas (1971, pp. 221ff.). Habermas discerns an attempt at self-im-

munization against criticism in my way of depicting "truth" as a medium of communication (since I then use this concept to judge my own theory). This, he feels, is a sign of "social engagement" but not a "practical" or "rational" sort. Incidentally, one cannot simultaneously accuse systems theory of this circle *and* of a lack of understanding for reflection. This circle *is* reflection!

50. We shall not at present pursue the further problem of infinite repetition. See note 10 above.

51. Luhmann (1973b). See Ophüls (1968) on the logical problems, and for criticism see Hoerster (1970), Ross (1969), and Raz (1972).

52. Indeed, it seems advisable to renounce those ontological and theological premises according to which the "logically impossible" is impossible *tout court.* Instead, we must thoroughly relativize propositions about impossibility (and propositions about the possible) in relation to specifiable conditions for possibility. See footnote 27 on the "logical impossibility" of *Herrschaft.*

53. As explained in Section I.

54. For similar consequences stemming from an awareness of the contingency of truth within science, see the important essay by Jensen and Naumann (1972).

55. We do not take account here of the theory of science itself. Suffice it to say that possibilities *do* emerge here for applying sociological analysis. Attempts have been made to analyze not only external or contextual factors, but also the contents of science—i.e., methods, paradigms, theories, and criteria of selection. On this point, see Weingart (1974).

56. After the renunciation of religious and moral supervision over the scientific production of truths and untruths (and this renunciation is a precondition of productivity for the scientific system) there is no agency capable of articulating the boundaries or limitations of research. Observation of these limits can only be enforced by a self-restriction of the scientific system itself. Or perhaps science can be limited in processes of cooperation with other social sectors—just as happened in the constitutional politics of the liberal State.

57. That it is the real *motive* for research is already quite dubious. Hagstrom (1965).

58. See, on this point, the chapter on truth as a medium of communication in Luhmann and Habermas (1971, pp. 342ff.).

59. These remarks aim directly at the content (not the intention!) of Husserl's original formulations. See especially the chapter on the life world in Husserl (1954, pp. 105ff.) in the context of a general critique of the "technicity" of the objective sciences. Cf. Janssen (1970) and, especially on the problem of "extrascientificity," Strasser (1964, pp. 61ff., and *passim*). For a further analysis of the concept and the structure of the life world, see Schutz (1966) (which has gradually begun to establish a "school" in sociology) and now, above all, Brand (1971).

60. Maciejewski (1972) insists along with Habermas on a continued application of the category "life" in social theory. See, by contrast, the now merely "titulary" application of this concept by Brand (1971, pp. 383ff.), which can be easily translated into the language of systems and environments.

61. Eley is an exception (1969 and 1972).

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